I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Little Apocalypse

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No! I'm tinier, so it makes sense for me and Rekka to sleep in the same bed...
Harissa, you don't want to sleep in a cramped bed, do you? Rekka and I will sleep next to each other.
They continued to argue.

Monster... I'll kill you myself...
IMPRISONED GIRL?
But what can I do?
Shopgirl at Nozomiya Cafeteria
TSUMIKI NOZOMUNO
...Why are you doing all this for villagers who won't help you?
Daughter of the Mole People Chieftain
TETRA METRA RETRA

You okay, Iris?
Leave it to me!
Iris whistled a little as she dodged the fireball.

About the Characters

REKKA NAMIDARE

A high school freshman. Thanks to the Namidare bloodline, he keeps getting involved with girls that are in trouble.

SATSUKI OTOMO

A high school freshman. She is the girl-next-door childhood friend, and heir to the Omniscient Magic.

IRIS FINERITAS CYPHERCALL

A high school freshman. A space princess who's presently studying to be a bride on Earth.

HARISSA HOPE

A sorcerer from another world. She can't go back home anymore, so she's now living at Rekka's house.

ABOUT CHARACTERS

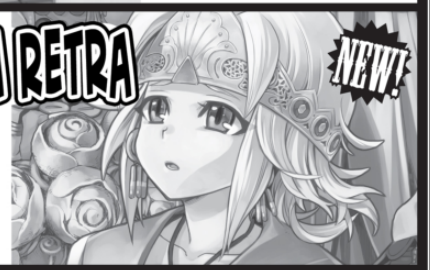
R

A demi-material being sent from the future in order to get Rekka together with a girl.

TSUMIKI NOZOMUNO

A high school freshman. Shopgirl at Nozomiya Cafeteria, her family's restaurant that's in dire straits.

TETRA METRA RETRA



Daughter of the chieftain of the mole people. Came to the surface in search of help to stop a disaster from befalling the world.

?

A mysterious girl trapped in a certain place. Has strong feelings of hatred and self-blame.

Prologue 1-1: Tsumiki Nozomuno

Tsumiki Nozomuno exhaled loudly in the quiet restaurant.

She would never let out a gloomy sigh like that in front of the customers, but that didn't matter now. The last customer had left a long time ago.

"Hahh..." Tsumiki looked around the empty establishment once more. Her shoulders slumped.

She'd been feeling pretty glum lately.

There were two reasons why Nozomiya wasn't doing well. The first was the fact that the shopping street where the restaurant was located had been getting emptier and emptier over the past few years. The other was the chain restaurant that had opened in front of the station. It had taken the last of Nozomiya's already dwindling customer base. Now the restaurant itself was in danger.

All Tsumiki's parents would tell her was that she didn't need to worry. But she knew it wasn't a matter of pride. They genuinely didn't want to worry her.

The three of them ran the tiny cafeteria together, and she loved it very much. She couldn't bear to lose it.

But is there anything I can do...?

She was popular in the neighborhood for her cheerfulness and energy. It was just that all of her fans were older folks, and there weren't enough of them to keep the place going.

The most obvious strategy was to undersell the restaurant at the station to bring back customers, but if that was feasible, she was sure her parents would be doing it already. If they weren't, that must mean it wouldn't work.

That meant that their last recourse was the food itself—to rethink the menu.

And it wouldn't be enough just to change the flavors of some of the dishes they already served. She needed something to make Nozomiya a destination restaurant. Something that would win the hearts of customers, not just their stomachs.

But while Tsumiki had been a waitress for a long time, she'd never cooked. There was a certain reason her parents wouldn't even let her set foot in the kitchen. There was no way she could come up with some amazing new dish that would solve everything on her own.

But Tsumiki wasn't the type of girl to sit still in the face of adversity.

“...Yeah. Okay, it’s decided!” She wouldn’t let her beloved Nozomiya go out of business. She was ready to do anything to keep that from happening.

Prologue 1-2: Tetra Metra Retra

There was once a monster that wrought destruction upon the earth.

Its body was so large that it covered the land as far as the eye could see. With each step, it caused earthquakes. With each breath, it caused whirlwinds. And it is said that this monster tried to destroy the world for its own pleasure.

This soon brought down the wrath of God, and the monster was punished.

Its massive body that had covered the earth was banished below the surface, within the Hall of Sealing, so that it could never come out. Next to the Hall of Sealing, God made a temple and a village. Then he made guardians from the dirt to guard its door...

And now, in the present, the descendants of those guardians were facing a greater peril than they had ever known.

“Yes. The Hall of Sealing shook again. Yes, the walls collapsed a little more...”

“I see. Understood.”

Tetra Metra Retra, the daughter of the village chieftain, looked up at the statue of the goddess in the great hall of the temple as she listened to the statement from the villager she’d sent to check on the seal.

“Thank you for the report.” Tetra bowed to him.

He was supposed to leave after that, but it seemed there was something he wanted to ask.

“Um, well... Is the seal really going to be broken?”

“...” For a moment, her face took on a bitter expression, but it soon returned to a vague smile.

“It will be fine. After it was sealed away, the ‘Monster Who Defied God’ went on a rampage that was serious enough to put a crack in the Hall of Sealing, but it finally tired and relented. That’s what the stories say. I don’t want you to worry.”

“Yes, of course. Then we’re fine. Of course.” The villager bowed and left the room.

“...Whew.” Once she was sure she couldn’t hear his footsteps anymore, Tetra let out a slightly aggravated sigh.

“How could a legend that’s tens of thousands of years old make you feel better?” she whispered to no one in particular, then shook her head in resignation.

Tens of thousands of years ago, God had blessed the village with several miracles in order to make it possible for them to fulfill their duties with ease. That included the gift of eternal food and shelter.

But those miracles had, at the same time, robbed the people of their will to live. Without needing to work hard to survive, people grow lazy, no matter how strong a sense of duty they might have.

The guardians were now drained of all vitality and ambition whatsoever. Even with the whole village in danger, they showed no initiative of their own. Tetra had to give them orders just to get them to look at the seal.

If anything, Tetra was the one treated as an outlier for trying to act. But even she could do nothing about the Monster Who Defied God.

...No. More accurately, she was the one person in the village who knew how to do anything about it. And she'd only found out by using her position as the chieftain's daughter to gather up all the fragments of legends in the village and research them.

"..." But she didn't try to put it into practice.

She couldn't. The method was far too cruel.

So what was there to do? She couldn't ask the villagers.

She had to get help from outside.

...Why are you doing all this for villagers who won't help you? she asked herself in weakness from the corner of her heart.

But she knew the answer. This village was her home, and she loved it.

She shook off her weakness and prepared to ascend to the surface.

Prologue 1-3: ?

The “Beast” held a strong hatred for the “Monster Who Defied God.”

How long had it lived with that loathing? ...The Beast wasn’t human. It had lived for an eternity, and even it didn’t know anymore.

The Beast was once tricked into lending the Monster its power.

It was that mistake that had cost the Beast everything.

The Beast had lost its freedom, and so it had no way of knowing what destruction the Monster had wrought upon the earth... but it assumed that the Monster had destroyed the world for its own satisfaction.

Hatred, regret, guilt...

“Monster... I’ll kill you myself...”

The Beast lived on, its body wracked by these three pains. Its hatred for the Monster was the only thing that kept it going. Defeating the Monster someday was its duty—the reason for its existence.

That was the only way it could stay sane. That was the only way it could find the strength to keep living.

And so the Beast waited.

It kept waiting for the chance that would grant it its freedom once more. It waited, not knowing if the chance would ever come.

It waited for the day when it would fulfill its revenge—its duty.

It suffered as it waited.

It hated as it waited.

And one day... The chance it had been waiting for finally came.

Chapter 1: The Shopgirl and the Dark Matter

It had been five days since I'd awakened to the bloodline of the Namidare, and saved three stories and three heroines.

I hadn't been caught up in any new stories since school started, so I was living a safe, peaceful high school life... Or, at least, that was the theory.

"Sir Rekka, you're looking a little tired today, aren't you?"

"...Huh?" Before I left for school, Harissa Hope had asked me that, and I wasn't sure how to respond.

Harissa had smoky blond hair and blue eyes that made her look like a foreigner, but she was actually a sorcerer from another world. She was currently unable to get home, so she was staying with me.

Harissa always volunteered to do the chores, and she'd been diligently working all morning in a bunny apron. Underneath that, she wore some of my old clothes because my mom's didn't fit. I thought she might not like wearing boys' clothing, but she seemed more okay with it than I had expected.

So yeah, Harissa was a good, hard-working girl. Sometimes she could be clumsy, but I found that cute.

Most guys would love to have a girl like that looking up at them and worrying... but I just looked away. “Nah, I just didn’t get enough sleep. A little rest a little at school and I’ll be fine,” I said, hoping she’d drop the subject.

“I see. I’m glad to hear it. See you later, Sir Rekka.” She seemed to believe the lie I fed her, and smiled radiantly.

I waved a cold, sweaty palm at her as she bowed, and then made my escape out the front door.

As I headed down the road to school with my classmate, Satsuki Otomo, she peered at my face.

“Rekka, are you tired?”

“...Huh?” It was the second time that day I’d gotten that question, and it took me a second to respond.

I tilted my head awkwardly and looked at her as she walked next to me. I still wasn’t used to seeing her in her high school uniform, and it made my heart flutter a little.

On the day of the school entrance ceremony, I found out that she was a mage, but things hadn’t changed that much between us since then. Evidently our relationship as childhood friends wasn’t going to change so easily.

She stood up straight, with her long, black hair blowing a little in the breeze, and looked at me like an older sister worried about a little brother who wasn’t taking care of himself. I was glad she was concerned, but... I looked away. “No, it’s just some sore muscles. I pushed myself a little too hard in gym class yesterday.” I just made up a reason, hoping she’d let it go.

“I see. If it hurts, you should get a heat pack from the nurse’s office.”

“Yeah...” I nodded halfheartedly, still looking away.

“Good morning, Rekka.”

“Hey. Morning.” The first person to greet me when I came into the classroom was the pretty girl in the next seat, Iris.

Her name was Iris Fineritas Cyphercall. The reason it was so long was that she was what you’d call an alien. She normally hid it inside her body so that no one could see it, but she actually had a pretty silver tail coming out of her butt.

There was a reason she was sitting here in my class as an “Earth exchange student,” but it’s a long story.

“Looking kinda tired, huh, Rekka?” Iris’s long twin tails bounced as she tilted her head and moved her face near mine.

“...Am I?” After the third time that morning, I didn’t have the

energy left to look away.

"Yeah, that's right. Like you're pushing yourself too hard."

"..." I knew exactly why, but I just avoided her gaze and stayed silent.

Iris must not have liked my response, because she leaped out of her seat and hugged me.

"H-Hey!"

"Aww, come on! Why are you making that face when you're lucky enough to get to see me?"

"No, we're both students. We see each other at school every day..."

"Rekka, don't talk back to me." You could tell she was a princess. Her selfishness shone through.

But when she grabbed onto me like that, other parts of her pressed against me... I won't say what, but two soft things! Even worse, everyone was staring at us! "Rekka! Iris! Get off of each other!" Satsuki yelled, slamming her hand down on the desk. Then she glared at Iris.

Satsuki sat on the other side of me. And each and every day, my stomach cried out in pain from being trapped between the two of them.

"Oh, shut it. I was just worried about Rekka's health."

"It didn't look that way to me."

"Don't get so upset. That's why even if you drink milk, none of the nutrients go to your breasts."

"I don't think enough nutrition's getting to your head, Iris."

All these two ever did was yell at each other.

"...Don't you think we need to have a talk soon?" Iris said with a cheerful smile on her face.

"Sounds great to me. I was thinking you and I needed to settle things." Satsuki's smile alone sent shivers down my spine.

Sparks were flying between the two of them, and I was still caught in the middle. If they were going to try and start a fire, I just wished they'd do it somewhere else.

"Let's take this outside," Iris taunted.

"First one who can't ever stand up again is the loser," Satsuki replied.

"Wait! Hold it, you guys!" I'd wished they'd do it somewhere else, but I kept trying to intervene anyway.

Both of them were starting to scare me, for one thing. What kind of discussion ends with one person never being able to get up again? The point of a conversation is to talk things out and find a peaceful solution!

And so began another psychologically taxing day for me.

▽

I knew exactly what it was. The reason I was feeling so tired all the time was...

"YOU GUYS!"

I screamed toward the mountains from the roof of the school. As I stood there panting, an echo came shouting back at me: "...guys!"

"What are you doing, Rekka? You look like a crazy person," said R, the girl in an army uniform floating next to me.

She looked like a young girl, but she was actually an artificial life form from the future sent to observe me. She was almost always expressionless, but she could be absolutely nasty.

"Don't call me a crazy person. If you had Satsuki and Iris and Harissa bugging you every day, you'd want to scream, too!"

"If one of the other boys heard that, they'd rip you apart."

"I don't care!" I ran both of my hands roughly through my hair.

"Then just choose one of the heroines already," R sighed.

R was here to stop the "War of All," a large-scale calamity that would occur in the future between the "heroines" I saved. In order to prevent it, I allegedly needed to pick a heroine to fall in love with.

And she never hesitated to remind me of that, either.

"It's not that easy."

"Oh, my. So you'd prefer a polygamous relationship?"

"Shut your mouth!" I turned to the fence and screamed again, but quickly got bored and started to roll along the roof. To be honest, I was reaching my limit.

My last name is Namidare. Namidares have a special bloodline that causes us to get caught up in "stories."

This special bloodline activates at the age of sixteen, and because of it, I've already fought ultimate mages, otherworldly demon kings, and galactic tyrants... Just thinking about it was enough to kill my mood.

I thought I'd somehow managed to make it through and regain my nice, normal life... But I realized the day after getting back how wrong I was.

For instance, who was going to make my lunch? Satsuki or Harissa?

Who would I pair up with in gym class? Satsuki or Iris?

Was it okay for me to sit on the same sofa as Harissa and watch TV?

"The lunch thing in particular was awful..."

"You mean when Satsuki and Harissa almost got into a duel?"

"Yeah..." Originally, Satsuki had been coming over every morning to make sure Harissa and I weren't "doing anything weird," but she

also made us breakfast and packed lunches. Once Harissa started to figure out how to do chores, however, she decided that she wanted to make lunches of her own. That's how it had all started.

Man, neither Harissa nor Satsuki was willing to back down an inch... The two of them almost had a magical duel right then and there.

Well, the most dangerous part was that they'd both expected me to eat what they made and tell them whose was better...

In the end, I got them to agree to switch off: if Harissa made breakfast, then Satsuki would make lunch, and if Satsuki made breakfast, then Harissa would make lunch. But by the time they reached a compromise, I'd almost given myself an ulcer.

That's basically how these five days had been for me.

"Don't tell me you're not enjoying the harem life."

"The only things I'm 'enjoying' are injuries and mental exhaustion..." I sighed and leaned against the fence.

My lack of sleep and sore muscles were all from dealing with the girls every day. If they didn't let me get some rest soon, it might actually kill me.

This bloodline of mine was turning out to be a real hassle.

"If I get caught up in another story, I'm going to be screwed..." I looked up at the partially cloudy sky and whispered.

"You should know better than to tempt fate."

...I hate people from the future.

It was just then that the sun ducked behind the clouds.

▽

Lunch break was almost over, so I decided to leave the roof.

R was bent over in the shape of a boomerang, flying in a circle around me and shouting, "My head is spinning!"

It was *extremely* aggravating, but supposedly she couldn't get more than five meters from me, so there was no helping it. I ignored R as best I could and hurried down the hallway.

I'd gone to the roof of the special classrooms building in hopes of avoiding everyone, so I needed to book it to make it back to my classroom in time.

"Hey, hey, hey! You! You! You there!" I heard a very fast-talking voice behind me and stopped.

I turned around to see a girl in a slightly messy school uniform pointing a chopstick at me.

"Wh-What?"

Judging from the color of her tie, she was a first-year student like me, but something about the way she looked made me wary.

"Did you eat lunch yet?"

“Huh...?” I was caught off guard by her sudden question.

The girl’s hair came down to her shoulders, and she had it tied to the left. She tapped her foot against the floor impatiently.

“I asked if you’ve eaten lunch yet,” she reiterated.

“...I haven’t eaten today, no.”

I had rushed right out of the classroom to blow off some steam. If I’d waited any longer, Satsuki and Iris would’ve both grabbed me and demanded to know who I was eating lunch with. The thought was too horrible to contemplate.

“You haven’t eaten, right? You’re telling the truth, right?”

“Yeah, but... isn’t that a weird question to ask at the end of lunch break?”

It was pure happenstance that I hadn’t eaten that day. Normally, I would have long finished my meal by then. In a sense, this girl had gotten extremely lucky...

“Then eat this,” she said as she poked her chopsticks into *something* on the plate she was holding in her other hand.

“...No, wait... What is that?”

It was black.

And not a natural black, like sesame seeds or seaweed. It was more like somebody had splashed all the colors on their palette against a canvas, then mixed it with potato starch soaked in sulfuric acid... I’m not sure where I was going with that simile, but it was that kind of putrid black.

And this suspicious black ball was being brought right in front of my face. My survival instincts screamed at me to flee. If I didn’t flee, I would die.

“S-Sorry, I’m not hungry. Bye.” I tried to run—but she got in front of me.

“That’s all the more reason to eat it. I put in dried plums and lemon and grapefruit and chili paste... Oh, balsamic vinegar and spicy miso, too, so it should stimulate your appetite.”

“That doesn’t make sense! That doesn’t make any sense at all!”

“Sour foods stimulate saliva production and make you hungrier. Spicy stuff does something similar. So I put in curry rice, too. Everybody loves curry rice.”

“That’s too much stuff! And where is there curry rice in that black ball?!”

“I just mixed it all up, kneaded it, fried it, steamed it, froze it, added in a secret ingredient, combined it—and this is how it turned out.”

It’s not a stew or a salad, so you can’t just mix everything together! And that part about the secret ingredient worried me even more. Did she mix in some mud or something?! My survival instincts

screamed even louder.

"...!" I turned around, speechless.

I tried again to flee as fast as I could, but she reacted quickly, tripping me and knocking me to the ground. She then climbed on top of me and straddled me. Was there no escape?!

"Now give up and eat it!"

"Wait, wait, wait! I actually don't like spicy food!"

“I see. But there’s chocolate and Mont Blanc in it, too, so you’ll be fine.”

“That’s even worse! I-I know! If there’s curry in it, there’s beef, right? I can’t eat beef for religious reasons!”

“Fine. What’s your religion?”

“Um… Uh…” What religion was it that couldn’t eat beef again?

“I knew you were lying. Why does everyone lie to me?”

“…Everyone?”

“Whenever I try to feed this to someone, they all lie and try to run away. It’s so rude. I stayed up all night making this new menu item for Nozomiya. You should be happy that you get to eat it.”

“…Just out of curiosity, what happened to the people who lied?”

“They’re all sleeping in the nurse’s office.”

“Gyaaahh!” This was way too dangerous!

Just then, I saw a girl appear in the hallway of the special classrooms building.

“Tsumiki! What are you doing?!”

“Tch!” The girl she called Tsumiki panicked and tried to force open my mouth.

“I won’t let her stop me this time! Now eat this!”

“GYABUH?!”

When the black mass hit my tongue, I tasted something I’d never tasted before—and I suddenly started to remember things like the picnic I went on with my parents when I was a kid, and playing in the park with Satsuki…

“That’s your life flashing before your eyes,” my survival instincts said. “You won’t be needing me anymore.”

And then everything went black.

“UGWAH!”

I had a dream that a giant, black pill bug crushed the entire world. It almost crushed me, too…

When I woke up, I found myself in the nurse’s office. I could see the sheets I had flung off the bed when I’d leaped up, as well as a sweat-soaked pillow.

“Rekka, I’m glad you’re okay. You’re really awake, right?” Satsuki asked as she came through the curtains.

She dropped the damp towel she was carrying and sobbed with joy.

“I’m glad… I’m so glad… We did everything we could, but they said you might never wake up again…”

“…What? I was that bad off?”

I remembered that Tsumiki girl forcing a black ball down my throat… but I couldn’t remember anything after that.

Satsuki put her hands on my forehead and chest. She still looked worried.

"What happened? It was like you'd taken a cursed poison so vile that it must have been made from hundreds of sacrifices..."

"A cursed... poison?" I knew it was bad when I heard what was in it, but evidently it was far worse than I'd thought.

"Fortunately, it wasn't magical, so I was able to break the curse." Satsuki gravely reiterated that it had been a close call for me.

All I could do was flash a forced smile.

If her cooking could scare even a magic expert like Satsuki, then, in a sense, wasn't she a genius?

Apparently there were plenty of other victims of this girl—Tsumiki, her name supposedly was—but Satsuki had healed them all. None of them were forced to eat the whole ball like I was, so they'd all woken up and left already.

"Hey, where's Iris?" I would've thought she'd be the first person to show up for a fuss like this, but I didn't see her anywhere.

"Um, well... She..." Satsuki went on to explain that when her anti-curse spells had failed to work at first, Iris had said she was going to get "the most advanced medical technology in the universe" and left school—that is, she had left Earth.

"So she's headed for planet Finerita?"

"Probably... Thinking back on it, I should've stopped her, but I was panicking, too. I just couldn't..." Satsuki looked regretful.

Maybe she was upset that she hadn't been thinking clearly.

"Nah, it's okay. Both of you were worried about me, right? Thanks for that."

"Y-Yeah..." Satsuki looked away, embarrassed for some reason.

Anyway, Iris was in space, huh? That meant that there was no way for me to get in touch with her now. If I could have told her I was safe, I'm sure she would have hurried back, but...

As I thought to myself, someone opened the door to the nurse's office and came inside.

"Oh, you're awake. I'm glad."

It was the girl who'd tried to stop Tsumiki earlier.

Tsumiki's friend, Sato, apologized to me and explained the situation.

"Food Champion?" I asked for clarification.

"Yes. It's a big event they hold every year in the next town over. Lately there's been a big junk food boom, so now it's broadcast on TV nationwide," Sato continued.

I wasn't really into that sort of thing, so it was all news to me.

"I see. So she wants to win there and help save her family's cafeteria?"

“Yeah, something like that.”

“And that’s why she’s making this creative food and feeding it to everyone?”

By “creative food,” I meant that black mass she force-fed me. But in all honesty, there was no way that “food” was going to work out for her. The only thing she was going to win was a free ride in a cop car.

“Um, her dad’s the chef at this Nozomiya place, right? Can’t he enter Food Champion?” I asked.

But Sato shook her head, “No offense to Tsumiki’s dad, but... Nozomiya makes the kind of stuff you could get at any old restaurant. I really don’t think he could make anything that would impress the judges.”

So that was it. It wasn’t just that they needed to enter the competition, they really needed to win it.

“Then can someone teach her to cook?” I continued to question.

It was then that Satsuki interjected. She had been following along, too, and had come up with a different idea. There was no guarantee it would make Tsumiki win, but it would certainly give her better odds than what she had now.

But Sato looked a little perturbed.

“Once Tsumiki makes up her mind, she’s the type who never relents. Who knows if she’d even listen to anybody...”

“That’s...”

“That’s a difficult personality to deal with...” Satsuki and I both whispered.

“I’m sorry,” Sato apologized, even though it wasn’t her fault.

Hmm... Now, this Food Champion tournament and a restaurant in danger of going out of business...

Wait, isn’t that...

“Hey, R.” I whispered over my shoulder when Sato wasn’t paying attention.

“Aww, that tickles.”

“It’s not sexy when you say it in a flat voice. So I’m guessing Tsumiki is a heroine?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

Turns out I was on the money.

But good grief... That meant I didn’t have a choice in the matter. I was just an ordinary guy who hated trouble, but I wasn’t cold-blooded enough to just abandon a girl to her fate when I knew it was going to be a sad one.

Sometimes that got me into trouble... but it’s what anyone would do, right?

“Okay, I understand. I’ll work something out.”

“What?!” Both of the girls shouted at the exact same time.

▽

After learning what class Tsumiki was in from Sato, I set off down the hallway.

By the time I left the nurse's office, sixth period was over, meaning we had a short break before homeroom started. I had to use this brief window of opportunity to find Tsumiki and get through to her.

"Rekka, how are you going to convince Nozomuno?" Satsuki asked as she followed me.

It was good question. Based on what I'd heard about Tsumiki from Sato, she wouldn't be easy to persuade of anything.

"I'd like your help with that."

I turned around to look my mage friend in the eyes.

"Me?"

"Yeah, more specifically..."

Tsumiki's classroom was three rooms down from ours. I knocked on the door before I went in, but nobody really seemed to notice. It probably had something to do with the fact that people were always coming and going during break. Besides, the school year had practically just started, so it's not like anyone knew the faces of all their classmates yet.

But I spotted the girl I was looking for and walked straight over to her desk.

Tsumiki's eyebrows twitched when she saw me.

"...Hmm? Who are you?" She didn't seem to remember the person she'd almost poisoned to death just now.

Although, I'd wandered the threshold between life and death for at least an hour, so maybe it wasn't really "just now" anymore... But still, that didn't mean it was okay to force food down someone's throat and then forget about them right after they collapsed, right? ...Well, whatever.

Anyway, I decided to talk to her.

"Um, I'm Rekka Namidare. I heard your family's cafeteria was in trouble, and um... I was wondering if there was something I could do to help."

"...Who told you?"

"Sato."

"Sato, huh...? Well, it's not your problem. Get lost."

Grr... This wasn't getting anywhere.

"A-At least listen to me, okay?"

"Shut up. And leave me alone! I'm busy coming up with a new recipe."

Was I supposed to assume that she meant she was developing a

new kind of poison? No, no. It wasn't the time to worry about that. A girl's fate was on the line here.

"Tsumiki. Do you have any more of that black... I mean, that creative dish you made?"

"God, you're still here? I guess I do. But what do you care?"

Yup. I was right.

"Let me have some."

"Huh?" Tsumiki perked up. She had been looking away with disinterest, but now she turned to me in surprise.

"You're working on new recipes, but you still need someone to taste them, don't you?"

"...Not really. That's not an issue."

"Liar. You were just forcing people to eat your cooking."

"...Did you see me?"

"No, I was one of those people." There was a note of anger in my voice, but I didn't care.

"It's gotta be time-consuming to find someone to try it every time, right? That's time you could be spending on other things."

"Sure, but..." Tsumiki looked a little uncertain, but pulled a piece of tupperware out of her bag.

She opened the lid, and I saw the black balls inside.

"Ugh..."

"If you pass out every time you eat it, it won't save me any time. Just so you know, everything I cook turns out like this."

"...So you knew it wasn't good?"

"Shut up. Sato got really mad at me for that. Listen, are you going to eat it or not?"

Why did she sound so bossy about it? Well, whatever. I only had to take that black ball—maybe it would be best just to call it dark matter—and manage to eat it all without passing out.

"Okay, give it to me."

I moved the dark matter up to my mouth.

"..." I could see Tsumiki gulp a little bit.

Chomp.

"Mmwarraaggghmm!" It was a strange taste: bitter, spicy, and salty, but just a little sweet and creamy, yet crunchy and teeth-chattering at the same time. Mostly, it was hard to describe.

Satsuki was sitting next to me. All I could do was look at her as I tried to hold back the tears. She nodded, a bead of sweat running down her face.

That meant the anti-curse spells she'd put on me were doing the trick. She had said that her healing magic worked after I'd passed out the first time, so I thought that maybe defensive magic might work as well.

Thanks to that—just like I'd hoped—I didn't pass out.

But there was still a terrible explosion of tastes going off in my mouth. Maybe without the defensive magic, it would have been even worse.

"Mgghh...! G-Gaaahh!"

...The spell *was* working, right?

It's probably rude to be so blunt, but this thing was so disgusting that it was dangerous. If she took it to the tournament, it might get treated as some kind of weaponized food. The SDF or even the UN might have to get involved.

Even if things didn't go that far, Nozomiya would go out of business and her story would end poorly. I had to stop that, no matter what. But it didn't change how revolting this was!

Down the hatch!

I somehow managed to swallow the whole thing. My head drooped to the desk.

"B-But... I didn't pass out?!"

I was feeling a little woozy, but I was able to endure it all. I really owed Satsuki for this one.

Tsumiki's eyes went wide for a moment, but then she started to smirk.

"Hmph. Fine. I'll let you be my taste tester for a while."

She offered me her hand.

"So? What's your name?"

"I told you, and you already forgot... It's Rekka Namida—?!"

I went to take her hand, but she suddenly pushed me. I lost my balance and fell backwards onto my butt. Oww...

"I'm Tsumiki Nozomuno. Just so we're clear, you're nothing but my taste tester. Don't think that you've got a girlfriend or anything now, okay?"

"...I'll keep that in mind." I nodded weakly.

"Looks like you've got a long way to go, huh?" R looked down at me, seemingly unconcerned, as she floated upside down in the air.

▽

After school, I headed straight for Nozomiya to taste test (poison test?) Tsumiki's latest creation. As I sat at the empty counter, a bored R peeked into kitchen to see what she was doing.

"Rekka, don't die here, okay?"

Saying it like that, I wasn't sure if she was concerned about me or just being a jerk.

I put my elbows on the countertop and sighed, really starting to worry.

It was just me, R, and Tsumiki in Nozomiya. Her parents had a

shopping street meeting and wouldn't be back until late.

I thought Satsuki might agree to come, but she had to go to the mountain behind the school to pick herbs for her potions.

"I'm going to make you some simple stomach medicine. And get some materials for anti-curse and anti-poison spells," she'd said.

I definitely owed Satsuki big time. No joke. Without her, I might not have even survived this storyline.

But she couldn't come soon enough with those potions! I was desperate! Tsumiki emerged from the kitchen, dressed in short sleeves and wearing a bandana on her head.

"It's done."

So it was finally time...

I prepared myself to fulfill my duty as taste tester, but I wasn't anything close to ready for what followed.

"ZzzZZOOGHH?!"

Once again, there was a terrorist attack in my mouth. I fell out of the chair and hit my head on the floor. My whole body twitched.

Tsumiki looked down at me, annoyed, but then she patted my shoulder with her ladle.

"So? How does it taste?" she asked, as if nothing at all was wrong.

"IT TASTES AWFUL!" I screamed, my head still hurting from the impact, and worse, the food.

"That's because you have bad karma."

"The tortures of hell would be better than this!"

Afterward, I chugged several glasses of water and decided to get a firsthand account of how this mess was made. There was obviously something going very seriously wrong.

As it turned out, it wasn't just one thing...

"Wait! Why are you mixing all those spices together?!"

"I'm making a new sauce."

"But you've already mixed in a few dozen! The bowl's overflowing!"

"Shut up. Just have a taste and see if it's good." "Mmm... GWAAH!"

Or...

"Wait. What are all these weeds doing here? They've still got dirt on them!" "There's no plant that's named 'weed.' Maybe one of them is edible. Let's start by tossing them all into the blender."

"Gyaah! Wait, why are you putting grass in there?"

"It's a plant, too. Maybe it'll go nicely. Here goes."

"Grass doesn't go nicely with anything! And wow, that smells awful... Hold on, did you shake the dirt off?"

"They say it's fresher if the dirt's still on it."

"That's how you tell if it's fresh when you buy it!"

“I see. Then I’ll put this in some gelatin. But if I’m making a dessert, I should add something sweet. Do you prefer chocolate or cotton candy?”

Or...

“Do you know why everything you make always ends up becoming dark matter?”

“No, I don’t.”

“It’s because you mix it all together! If you mix a bunch of paint together, it all turns black! It’s probably the same thing! Please, try and make something more normal!”

“I can’t win Food Champion with normal food! What I need is something with impact!”

“You’re not a new celebrity trying to get people to remember you by making funny faces! You need a lot more than just impact.”

“...A theme song?”

“Are you a pro wrestler now?!”

Or...

No, this really was turning into a comedy sketch that had less and less to do with the culinary arts. Tsumiki’s cooking was so bad on such a fundamental level that I started to question what she was doing here at all.

“Aww, jeez! Just shut up already! I’m doing all of this by myself after all!” At last, she started to snap.

“...” I didn’t have the energy to say anything back, so I just collapsed into a chair.

An awful silence filled the kitchen.

“...I’m gonna go throw out the garbage,” Tsumiki said as she took a huge plate full of the black balls out the back door.

“...Hahh.” I sighed and ran my hands through my hair.

We had a week to go until Food Champion. I needed to find some way to bring this to a happy ending before then.

But I wasn’t any good at cooking either. There was no way I could whip up something that would win a professional competition. The same was probably true of Satsuki, Iris, and Harissa. And R wasn’t going to help me resolve any of the storylines I got myself into.

“...”

I needed to calm down and think things through. Tsumiki had always worked as a waitress at Nozomiya, but she had no practical cooking experience. As bad as she was at it, her parents probably stopped her when she tried.

The best cooks I knew were my dad and Satsuki. If I was going to ask one of them for help, it would probably be Satsuki. But even then, I couldn’t see her winning Food Champion.

In light of where we stood, however, having Satsuki teach Tsumiki

to cook was likely the best option.

When I suggested that to Tsumiki, she had replied, “You really are stupid, aren’t you? I mean, if we had some famous dish the town was known for, like Utsunomiya gyoza or Sanuki udon, then maybe I could go with that. But this town doesn’t have anything like that! And we’re just a plain old cafeteria! If we do this any old way, we’ll never win! So we need to come up with something that nobody’s ever seen!”

She followed up by lobbing a pineapple at my head. It hurt. Now all I had to show for this was my bandaged face.

Still, there was some truth to what she said. Nozomiya didn’t have anything going for it. If she wanted to win, she needed to aim for a grand slam. That’s why she was breaking all the rules and trying to come up with new, bizarre ways of cooking. But it was a bad bet.

“I know how to defeat evil demon kings and mages... but this is just as hard in a different way, damn it.”

Even so, the weight of what hung in the balance was the same. If I didn’t do something, both Tsumiki and Nozomiya were going to meet with a bad end. It was my job to keep that from happening.

“But still... Cooking, huh?”

And not only did we need to win Food Champion, we needed to breathe life into Nozomiya. Maybe we could somehow use magic to trick the Food Champion judges into thinking her food was great. But even if that got customers to come back to the restaurant, if the food wasn’t any good, they’d just leave again.

“Now then, can you save this story, Rekka?” R asked mockingly as she lay down and flailed her legs in the air.

“Grr... It’s gonna be tough.”

“Oh, giving up already?”

“Cooking is all about practice, right? I don’t know... If we can’t come up with a special way to cook, maybe we should find some new ingredient that no one’s ever had. That’s all I can come up with.”

But where would you even find something like that? If Iris were around, maybe she could have gotten us something from another planet, but that didn’t help us now. If only there were some way to get in touch with her...

“By the way, isn’t Tsumiki taking her sweet time?”

“You’re right, actually...”

R and I looked out the back door.

Since she’d taken the whole tray, she was probably using the dumpster out back behind the store. She wouldn’t take that giant platter of dark matter too far.

But there’d been more than enough time to take care of that. Maybe she’d done something else when she’d stepped out. I was a little worried.

“I guess I’ll go take a look.”

“Probably a good idea.”

I stood up, and R swam along beside me as we went out the back door together.

The taste testing session must have gone on longer than I had thought. The sun had already set.

“Hm?” I found Tsumiki quickly.

She was kneeling down in the corner of the backyard, doing something quietly.

“…?”

Suspicious, I got closer to her.

“What are you doing?”

“Kyaaah! D-Don’t scare me like that!” Tsumiki dropped the shovel she was holding in surprise.

Why did she have a shovel?

“You weren’t planning on burying the dark matter you made in the ground, were you? That would pollute this area so badly that nothing would grow for centuries… Huh?” I looked down at where her hands had been only to see a mysterious hole.

A shovel and a hole.

There was nothing unusual about the combination, but there was nothing usual about this hole.

For starters, you couldn’t see the bottom. It was only about the size of a small dinner plate, so digging any deeper would mean sticking your arm into it. But there wasn’t any dirt on Tsumiki’s clothes.

Stranger still, the surface of the hole was pitch black. Even the deepest hole should let you see into it at least a little at the top.

And weirdest of all, little black tentacles of darkness crept from edges of the hole.

Conclusion: This was no normal hole.

“What… What is that hole?”

“It’s where I always throw away my garbage. Why?”

“No, no, no! I’m not asking what you do with it. It looks like a black hole or the entrance to the abyss to me!”

“Huh? Do you have fairy tales for brains?”

Ugh. Maybe it wasn’t the best analogy, but…

“No, seriously, what is that hole?!”

“I found it by chance when I was a kid. I tried to fill it with dirt, and I couldn’t, so normally I just put a cover on it and then hide it with dirt.”

“Why do you hide it?”

“I told you before, right? This hole swallows everything, so it’s really handy. It’s small, so you don’t have to worry about falling in,

either."

...Ah. So she'd been throwing the dark matter down there, huh? Well, I guess she couldn't let her parents see it when they got home from their meeting.

"Hey, are you sure you don't at least want your dad to help?"

"Yes, I'm sure. Mom and Dad are trying really hard to keep me from worrying, so I'm pretending not to notice. Besides, I started this, so I have to do it myself..."

I sighed, but softly so that she wouldn't hear me.

Maybe she was just headstrong. She seemed to think that once she'd gotten herself into something, she had to take responsibility for it. That was a generally a good thing, sure, but it could be taken too far.

She only seemed to think of me as a taste tester, and since she wouldn't listen to my advice, I had no way of helping her. At this rate, it was going to be extremely difficult for me to help her achieve her goal.

I might've even said it was impossible. That was how grim things were looking.

"..."

"..."

Tsumiki and I stared at the mysterious hole for a while. As I looked at it in the starlight, it started to feel like I could fall down it forever...

"..." It was a scary thing to imagine.

I shook my head.

In front of me, Tsumiki was shaking her head, too. Maybe she'd been imagining the same thing I was.

Eventually she turned around and looked up at me.

"...Hey."

"What?"

"Why did you agree to help me?"

Crouched down like she was, she looked smaller than usual. Almost like she'd gotten younger.

"Well, I... I just couldn't leave you alone."

Tsumiki was a heroine, but she was also just an ordinary girl. Since telling her about the Namidare bloodline would only make her think I was a weirdo, I decided not to mention it. But she looked surprised at my answer, then curled herself into a ball like she was hiding something she didn't want me to see.

"...Tsumiki?"

"Sh-Shut up! I don't know how you can say something so embarrassing with a straight face." "...?" Had I said something embarrassing?

Tsumiki was the one who looked embarrassed. She'd gone red up to her ears. Was I imagining it? For a while after that, she'd just tell me to shut up whenever I said something, but then there was silence.

"You're weird. You passed out eating my food, yet you still want to help me." Tsumiki whispered as she buried her head in her knees.

"Sorry I'm weird... Wait."

Wait a second. Did I hear what I thought I just heard?

"So you do remember me. You pretended like you didn't!"

"Shut up. It was right after everyone else I fed had come to complain to me. So I just decided to pretend to forget."

Come to think of it, I wasn't the only victim, was I?

I understood not wanting to get yelled at, but couldn't she have responded some other way? She was so obstinate.

"...Hey," Tsumiki said again.

"What?"

"You think I can win the Food Champion tournament?"

"..."

"I-I'm not getting down or anything! I just want an impartial opinion, you know? Or a third-party opinion, or whatever."

They were the same thing, but I didn't correct her.

What was I supposed to say? To tell the truth, there was no way she could win. I was certain of it. There was no hope. But it didn't seem like she was reaching for someone to comfort her.

What she wanted was a way to win. She wanted a plan.

"..." But I couldn't give her the answer she wanted.

"I can't cook, but I love this restaurant. I love the elderly folks who come here all the time, too. So I want to win, no matter how bad things look. I want to try and try and try all the way to the bitter end."

Maybe she was steeling herself in the face of impossible odds, or maybe she just wanted someone to listen to her feelings...

Either way, I realized it again.

Even if there were no space empires, no other worlds, no mages, no meteors, and no demon kings, this "story" was still very important to her.

"Let's do our best and make this new dish. I'll help you."

"I asked you before, but why are you being so supportive?"

She seemed suspicious again. But there was only one answer.

"Because I want to help you."

"That again...?!"

"Hmm?"

Had I say something weird again? Tsumiki was taking deep breaths and trying to calm herself down. When she finally turned around a moment later, she stuck her finger right in my face, pointing

at me with new-found composure.

“Hmph! You’re just a mouth to taste things for me. All you need to do is eat what I give you and tell me how you like it.”

“Right, right.”

Sheesh. She was really and truly stubborn. And I wished she wouldn’t blush so hard just to say thank you. It was embarrassing me.

Having collected herself, Tsumiki stood up and brushed herself off.

“We wasted a bunch of time. Let’s get back to work.”

“Right, whatever.”

“Show some enthusiasm!” she called, running off towards the back door.

“Hmm, for you, I guess that was a passing score.”

“For what?”

“I wish you could get to the point where you understood that.”

I didn’t know why R was grading me, but as I started to head back to the cafeteria...

“Rekka!”

“...Satsuki?”

Satsuki had said she wasn’t going to come today, but she showed up in a panic. And it wasn’t just her.

“Hey, who’s that?”

Satsuki was carrying a small girl on her back.

“I don’t know. I found her passed out on the mountain. I gave her some first aid, but she’s still not fully awake...”

“Then take her to a hospital.”

“I thought about doing that at first, but she might not be human.”

“What...?”

Satsuki wasn’t the type to joke at a time like this, so I took another look at the girl on her back.

She had a unique appearance. Her hair was white with a bit of green at the tips, and I could tell how marble-white her skin was, even in the darkness. She was wearing a cloth robe, but it was a little dirty.

She was so pale that she almost looked sickly, but it wasn’t enough for me to think she wasn’t human... Or at least that’s what I thought until she gave a weak moan and opened her eyes.

“!” Beneath her eyelids, I saw shining eyes. They flashed like a cat’s. They definitely weren’t normal.

“Help me... The Monster is...”

When I heard her quivering voice as she looked at me and begged for help... I knew I’d been caught up in another story.

Chapter 2: The Mole People and the Magical Girl

We laid the girl down in the guest room on the second floor of Nozomiya, and I had Satsuki make her some rice porridge. She seemed very weak, but some food and water went a long way to improving her pallid appearance.

"...Whew. Thank you, I appreciate it," the girl said as she got up from her futon and bowed. The accessories she was wearing, which appeared to be made of stone, clinked together as she moved.

She seemed to be out of danger now. Sitting on either side of her, both Satsuki and I felt relieved.

"I'm glad you're doing better," Satsuki replied, smiling.

"Thank you. I dropped my light and my food on the way up... I figured it would be better to head for the surface instead of going back. That's how I ended up like this."

I blinked.

"Head for the surface?"

That made it sound like she'd come from somewhere strange.

"Yes, actually. I'm from an underground village on a mission to the surface of the earth."

"..."

Did that mean she was one of the mole people?

She gasped and looked down when she saw our expressions.

"I'm sorry. This must sound incredible, huh?" She bowed to us again.

"Umm..." I tried to say something, but was quickly stumped when I realized I didn't know her name.

She introduced herself as Tetra Metra Retra, and when she turned to look at me, I could see her brown eyes. Evidently they only shone in the dark.

"Okay, Tetra. When you said 'help me' back there, what did you mean? You said something about a monster... Can you tell me more?"

It was just me, Satsuki, Tetra, and R in the room now. We were all well-versed in the fantastical, so we could listen without any prejudice.

But Tetra looked at us each in turn, a little skeptically.

"Okay, I don't mind, but... I'm really going to tell you about a monster. So, um..."

“Well, we are just ordinary high school kids. We may not be able to help you, but... Come to think of it, did you have anyone you were planning to contact when you got here?”

“No. It’s out of our control now, so I came to the surface as a last resort...”

“I see. Then your ‘last resort’ is probably me.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Well, you see...” I explained my lineage to Tetra.

“The bloodline of the Namidare...”

“Well, it might be hard to believe. But that’s why I think I probably have to help your story, too.”

“...I see.”

Just what you’d expect from a fantasy story with a monster. She accepted the story of the Namidare bloodline without question.

“I didn’t have anyone to turn to in the first place. Perhaps it was fate that brought me to you. If you would, please listen to my story.”

She told me how she was born in a village beneath the surface of the earth, Jizu Village. She told me how the village came to be, and about the seal that protected them from the Monster Who Defied God. And then she told me that the seal was about to break.

“A village of guardians below the earth, huh?”

“Yes. My ancestors have protected the seal for tens of millions of years, according to lore.”

“Wow, that’s a long time. Satsuki, when were humans born on the surface?”

“About 7 million years ago, I think.”

Hmm... So maybe the mole people and surface-dwellers were both human, but had different ancestry? They had shining eyes, after all.

“But why is the seal being broken all of a sudden? If the monster is a living thing, it should weaken as time passes, and it’s lasted this long, right?”

Tetra shook her head, confused.

“We don’t know. But the seal is also tens of millions of years old. Maybe it’s not as strong as it used to be. If the Monster found some way to restore its energy, it might be able to break the seal.”

“...And if the monster revives, it’s going to destroy both your underground village and the surface, huh?” I glared at the roof as I spoke.

My opponent this time was a “monster” from the age of gods, huh?

“Is it possible to seal it away again?”

“...I’m sorry. I don’t know how.”

According to Tetra, the traditions on how to restore the weakened seal, or to redo it, had been lost from their village. That’s why she’d

come to the surface.

But Satsuki and I had a trick up our sleeves.

“I’ll be right back,” Satsuki said as she stood up and left the guest room.

Satsuki was the mage who wielded the Magic of Omniscience. She had the access rights to the Akashic record, the annals of everything that had happened in the universe from the dawn of creation to the present day. It would be easy for her to recover a lost tradition.

The existence of the magic she used was a secret, so she couldn’t use it in front of other people, but soon she would be back with the knowledge to seal away the Monster. In the meantime, I tried to come up with a way to explain how we found out...

But when Satsuki returned, her face was pale.

“Satsuki?”

I was concerned by how my childhood friend looked, but she ignored me and stared at Tetra.

“...?” Tetra tilted her head and looked apprehensive.

“...Satsuki!”

“Oh!” Satsuki gasped as my shouting snapped her out of her trance.

“...It’s no good. The seal requires a special tool, and it can’t be used anymore,” she whispered as she returned to her seat.

“...Seriously?”

Even with Satsuki’s knowledge, I was still empty-handed. Since I’d thought that all I was going to have to do was find out how the seal worked, it came as quite a shock.

Did that mean I had to fight the “Monster Who Defied God” head-on? No way. I’d turn tail and run if it came to that.

I was out of options surprisingly fast.

“Jeez, come on...”

It would have been nice to find an item or a sidekick for once that could just take care of the story for me.

“Peep peep peep!” R was sticking her bottom half out of the ceiling and playing “Reverse Inugami Clan” as she imitated the cry of a bird.

As I thought about grabbing her by the ankles and yanking her out, there was a knock at the guest room door.

Was it Tsumiki? I stood up and headed towards the door that divided the guest room from the hallway...

“Hey. Do you need me to taste test... something?”

I opened the door and froze. It wasn’t the Nozomiya waitress who was standing there. And it didn’t look like one of her parents, either.

It wasn’t even human.

“Hello. I’m Bah. Nice to meet you.”

On the other side of the door was what looked like a creepy-cute version of a super-deformed elephant, holding some kind of weird stick. Almost like some sort of fairy.

“I’m coming in!”

Bah flapped his elephant ears and slipped through the air right past me into the room. I was too shocked to stop him.

“R-Rekka? What is that thing?”

“Huh?!”

The girls responded to the creepy-cute elephant thing by immediately backing five or so meters away from it.

“Hello. I’m Bah. Nice to meet you.”

He repeated the introduction he’d given me, and then landed on top of the futon where Tetra had been sleeping.

“Hm?”

There appeared to be a comically large bandage on his back. I was a little perplexed, but there was so much else weird about him that I didn’t know if I should bring it up.

“Wait, who are you?! Do you want something from us?!”

“Of course I do. That’s why I’m here. And I have a name, you know! It’s Bah.”

“Don’t give me some typical anime answer! A weird creature just showed up out of nowhere and I’m not even really sure what to do about it. Should I call the local news?”

“That wouldn’t be very nice. I’m here because I’ve got information you need. Shouldn’t you hear me out first?”

“…”

Not all that long ago, I would’ve flung Bah out the window, pulled the covers over my head, and told myself it was all a dream.

But right then and there, I needed something—anything—that could help me solve this story. And so I sat down in front of Bah, determined to listen to what he had to say.

“So, what did you want to tell us?”

“Well, first, I want to confirm something. Are you Rekka Namidare?”

“Yeah, that’s right.”

“Yes, good. I’m glad to hear that. I only know your name from rumors, so I didn’t know what I was going to do if I had it wrong.”

Had I done something that would make fanciful creatures like him gossip about me?

“All right, I’ll start with the most important thing.”

Bah shot me a creepy-cute smile that gave me goosebumps.

“Rekka Namidare. I’ll lend you my power, so become a magical girl and defeat the Monster Who Defied God.”

“……Huh?”

The whole room froze. Obviously.

“Huh? I thought magical girls were what you called mages in Japan.”

“That’s only in anime and manga!”

Evidently Bah was a foreigner. Maybe a foreign fairy?

People who weren’t from Japan had all kinds of weird ideas about the country. Some of them supposedly even thought that half of Japan was composed of ninjas.

“Well, that doesn’t matter,” I started, trying to get the conversation back on track. “So who are you? Tell me your real name, not just your nickname.”

“Aww, but I went to all the trouble of changing my appearance and name to be like a magical girl mascot character. “ Bah sighed, looking extremely disappointed. So much so that his face looked like he was about to breathe poison. “Okay, I’ll tell you who I am, then. I’m Bah. ‘The Perfect Beast,’ Bahamut.”

Come on. Who calls themselves perfect, normally? But that name… I was sure I’d heard it somewhere before.

“B-Bahamut?” Satsuki, who was still keeping her distance, shouted in surprise.

“Hmm? Satsuki, you know him?”

“Know him? Bahamut, behemot, behemoth… There are many names for it, including the Perfect Beast, but it’s a huge creature from the age of myths whose body was so large that it covered the earth. Are you saying that’s you?”

“That’s right. If you don’t believe me, why not ask your Akashic record, omniscient girl?”

“?!”

Satsuki’s face was flushed with shock once more. So was mine.

“Oh, but if you want to look it up, try where the ‘Bahamut That God Created’ is right now, or something conditional like that. If you try to access the hundreds of millions of years of my existence at once, it’ll probably fry your brain and turn you into a vegetable.”

“Wha?!”

A vegetable? Seriously? This magic was serious business, but I didn’t realize it could be dangerous.

“Wait! Hang on, Bah.” I cut him off and whispered into one of his big elephant ears, “…How do you know about the Magic of Omniscience?”

“Like I said when I introduced myself, I’m somebody amazing. I can use magic, too. Even so, it took me a little while to find you, but…” Bah said proudly.

“That is amazing, but this magic’s a secret, so don’t go telling

people about it, okay?"

I glanced behind me.

"?"

Tetra must not have known much about magic, because she simply looked confused. It wasn't that I didn't trust her, but I didn't want people finding out that Satsuki was heir to such powerful magic.

"I'm sorry. It wasn't the magic I was interested in, so I didn't think about it."

"Sheesh..." I sighed and glared a little at Bah. "Fine. She already knows now. Satsuki, do as he says and try it out."

"Okay."

"But if it's dangerous..."

"It's fine. Like Bah said, if I limit the search, it'll mean less information flowing into me."

"I hope so..."

"Tetra already heard, so I'll go ahead and do it here." Satsuki closed her eyes and activated the Magic of Omniscience. "...Yeah. It looks like the real Bahamut is here in the room with us. Not that I can believe it."

"You really were someone amazing?"

"Hahah. Yes, but behold my current form. No need to show me the respect I'm due. Just call me Bah."

He had said earlier that he'd changed his appearance. It was a little hard to imagine his true form when what was sitting in front of us was a creepy-cute elephant fairy.

"...Wait, why's a creature that's so amazing going to help us?"

"Basically, I want revenge on the Monster Who Defied God."

"Revenge?"

A not-so-cute word came out of his super-deformed mouth.

"The true identity of the Monster Who Defied God that's sealed in Jizu Village is Leviathan."

"First Bahamut, now Leviathan...?" Satsuki whispered.

"Um..."

Again, I had no idea what she was talking about, so I had to ask.

"Leviathan is a monster that's often spoken of as a counterpart to Bahamut. Just as Bahamut is called 'The Perfect Beast,' Leviathan is called 'The Strongest Beast.'"

After hearing Satsuki's thorough explanation, I understood most of what I needed to know about Leviathan.

...Wait. "The Strongest Beast"?

Talk about an ominous name. I bet something like that could destroy the surface a dozen times over. To be safe, I had Satsuki look up Leviathan's location. But just like Bah said, it was sealed in Jizu Village.

“Both Leviathan and I were created to be devoured by the gods as a sacrifice at the end of time. But...” Bah looked down.

A chill ran down my spine.

I could sense a powerful emotion coming from him as he stared at the floor. It made my hair stand on end.

“Leviathan was the Strongest Beast, and had a cold, cruel personality. It destroyed the earth’s surface just for its own amusement back then. And then it stole something very important from me.”

Revenge—that’s why he’d said he wanted to work with us.

But how long ago was this “back then” that he was talking about? We were talking millions and millions of years... He’d probably kept his hatred building up that long.

It was a span of time so long that I couldn’t even get my head around it. Just trying to imagine it made me feel like I’d go crazy.

“Okay. If that’s what’s going on, let’s work together to defeat the Monster Who Defied God.”

“...Thanks. You’re a big help!”

“No, thank you.”

In reality, if our opponent was “The Strongest Beast,” its counterpart was the strongest ally we could have.

We shook each hands—in Bah’s case, it was more like his front limb—and swore to work together to defeat the Monster Who Defied God.

“Alright, let’s get started. Rekka, I’ll lend you some of my power.”

“Thanks, but what power is that, exactly?”

“Well, it’s half magic. I’ll power up your basic abilities severalfold, and make it so you can use area of effect attack magic that will work on Leviathan’s vast body. Or can you already use area of effect attack magic?”

“Huh? Of course not!” Why did he think I could use magic? I didn’t know, but I made it clear that I couldn’t.

“Okay, close your eyes for a second and stay still.”

“Sure.” I closed my eyes as I was told.

“_____...__.__.....____”

Bah chanted something, and my body was suddenly struck by a strange feeling. It was hot, warm, and exciting—like power was welling up from within me. It was weird. Eventually it stopped, and I opened my eyes again.

“Are you done?”

“HAH!” Satsuki burst out laughing.

She had one hand over her mouth and was holding her stomach with the other. She was squirming and trying her best to stifle her laughter. It was a rare sight for my childhood friend to laugh like that.

Tetra was looking away from me, too, holding her hand over her mouth and shaking. There were tears in the corner of her eyes.

"That's going to make for a very surprising before/after photo set," R said flatly, with no expression on her face.

"What's going on?"

I looked down at myself—and burst out laughing just like the girls had.

A colorful dress that was so girly it was depressing.

A frilly, lacy skirt that gave no thought to ease of movement.

Boots with tiny angel wings.

A shining, magical stick in my right hand.

An opal of hope on my chest.

"WHAAAAAAAT THE HELL IS THIS?!"

I screamed. But I was pretty sure I knew.

It was obviously, clearly, plainly, and unmistakably a perfect magical girl costume. That's right. I was dressed as a magical girl.

If there was one flaw with it...

It was that I was a guy.

"THAT'S A FATAL FLAW, THOUGH!" This was no different from crossdressing.

"What's wrong? Is there a problem?'

"There are lots of problems!" I yelled at the confused, creepy-cute elephant... Wait, wasn't my outfit even worse than his?

Tetra and Satsuki were both still laughing.

I decided the best place to start was to demand an explanation for the getup.

"I thought for sure that when you gave someone magical power in Japan, you turned them into a magical girl."

Wait, that's what he said at the start! But I thought he'd realized he was wrong!

"What can I use this magic to do?" I asked, putting my embarrassment aside to get to the heart of what really mattered here.

"Just like I said before, you can use explosive, offensive magic that will affect a wide area. Try it out."

"How?"

"Well, start by opening the window."

"Hmm, okay."

I opened the window.

"Now point with the stick."

"Hmm, okay."

I held the stick straight out.

"Tell it to explode."

"Hmm, okay."

That sounded simple enough. Um, ex—

“And everything you see will explode.”

“Are you trying to get me to blow up the town with my test fire?!”

That was close! I almost destroyed the whole town.

“Then why not point it at the sky?”

“I’ll do that.”

I looked up at the night and aimed for a random cloud.

I had no idea how strong it would be, so I figured maybe I should fire a less powerful shot... If I focused on making it weaker, could I do that? I gave it a try.

And... KA-BOOM!

And, man... It was a huge blast—a hundred times bigger than summer fireworks.

“Wh-Wh-Wh-What was that explosion?!” I heard Tsumiki yell from downstairs.

Yeah. Sorry. That was me.

But Bah seemed to think nothing of it.

“Huh? How strange... That was several hundred times weaker than I’d planned.”

“What kind of dangerous magic did you give me?”

I whopped him on the head with my stick.

“Hmm, Rekka Namidare. Were you holding back just now?”

“I hit you as hard as I could!”

“No, I meant with the magic.”

“Huh? Well, yeah. I didn’t want anyone to get hurt.”

And I was damn glad. If I’d fired it off at full power like Bah had told me to, who knew what the shockwave would’ve done to the town?

“I see. Then it looks like the power I gave you is working.” Bah nodded, satisfied.

No, I was gonna fight a beast called the “Monster Who Defied God,” so it was good to have powerful magic, but...

“But can we at least do something about this skirt?”

“Hmm, if you want. But that outfit has self-defense capability and gravity reduction built into it. It will take a while to create something new.”

“Grr... That’ll be a problem...”

If we waited too long, Leviathan might break the seal.

Leviathan was a huge sea serpent. If Bahamut was big enough to cover the earth, Leviathan was big enough to swallow the sea. If the two of them fought, even if we beat Leviathan, it would mean serious damage to the earth’s surface.

But Tetra said that the space beyond the seal was huge. The size of the earth, even. If possible, that’s where I wanted to fight the beast.

“And then there’s Food Champion, too...”

“Huh? What’s that?”

“Oh, right. I didn’t tell you, Bah.”

I gave Bah a brief summary of the Namidare bloodline and Tsumiki’s story. While I was at it, I told him that we didn’t have a way to win the Food Champion tournament.

“Well, you know what? I think I can help with that.” Bah slapped his stomach with his long nose. “Just like I said before, Leviathan and I were created as offerings to the gods. Our meat is more delicious than any of your human food. Once you defeat Leviathan, you can use it to cook something that’s sure to win.”

“Ugh... But are you serious?”

For a second, it seemed kind of gruesome, but maybe it was a good idea. That way, I’d be able to save both of them: Tetra’s village and Nozomiya.

But that meant...

“...I’ve gotta put up with this outfit, huh?”

“That’s right.”

Ugh... Well, compared to the stories of these two girls, my self-respect meant nothing... At least, that was what I told myself.

“Okay, once we’re done preparing for our trip to Jizu Village, we’ll leave,” I said, trying my best to hide my embarrassment.

“R-Right... Bwahaha!”

“U-Um, okay! Heh! Please, Rekka... Don’t look at me with such a serious look on your face...”

Tetra and Satsuki were laughing again.

“Rekka, don’t do that. You’re a biological weapon capable of inflicting death by laughter on anyone who sees you now. We need to keep you in a dark, confined place so that you don’t hurt anyone.” R joined in and made things worse.

I felt like I wanted to cry.

We split up temporarily after deciding we’d all get ready and meet up again at the mountain behind school in an hour. That’s where the secret entrance to the underground was, supposedly.

Evidently I could store my magical girl outfit inside my bracelet. Once I stowed it, I was back in my school uniform. It was convenient, but I wish I’d been told before the girls laughed at me.

But the biggest problem wasn’t my clothes. It was Nozomuno.

It was late, so when I told her that we were going home, she didn’t really mind. But when I told her that I wouldn’t be able to come to Nozomiya for the next few days, she jumped down my throat.

“What? You said you’d help me at school! Did you give up on the first day?!”

“No, it’s not like that... You saw that Tetra girl, right? She’s apparently a foreign chef, and she’s come all the way to Japan to find

a legendary ingredient in the depths of the Fuji jungle." I fed her every excuse I could think of, but Nozomuno only glared at me more. "So I asked her to let me go with her. If we get the legendary ingredient, we might be able to win Food Champion."

"Liar!"

"I'm serious!" It was an obvious lie, but for now it was the only thing I had.

"...!"

Wham!

Tsumiki slammed her fists down hard onto the restaurant table, glaring at me with eyes that were a little teary.

"Tell me the truth. You're leaving because there's no way for me to win, right?!"

"That's not true," I answered immediately.

On the contrary, I had no intention of abandoning Tsumiki. But she continued to glare at me suspiciously.

"You keep saying that... But what's the real reason?"

"The reason?"

"That's right! Tell me why you're helping me! Otherwise, I don't know if it's okay to trust you!"

The reason I wanted to help her, huh...?

Because she was a heroine, and I'd been caught up in her story. That was probably why.

At least, that's how it had started.

"You're really stubborn, and you try to do everything yourself, but you work really hard, don't you? Even if you're terrible at it, you're trying your best to come up with a new menu item."

"...Why are you suddenly complimenting me? You can't fool me, you know."

"I'm not trying to fool you."

There was no way a kid could do something to get a restaurant's finances back on track, anyway. Sure, it was her family, so it made sense that she'd be worried, but how many kids would actually try to do something about it? I wasn't sure I would.

Even as high school students, we were still just kids. And it's normal for a kid to depend on their parents—but Tsumiki wasn't normal.

"To be honest, I think it's amazing. I like that about you."

"What?!"

"I like people like you. So I want to help you... Wait, are you okay?"

"Nwaaah?!" Tsumiki jumped backward in her chair, screaming in a weird voice.

"Tsumiki?"

“St-Stay away from me!”

I took a step forward, concerned, but she hissed at me. What was her problem?

She took several deep breaths, but evidently it wasn’t enough to calm her down. She put her hands on her cheeks and turned away.

“H-How can you say something so embarrassing like that?!”

“Hmm?”

Was it that strange to like people who worked hard? I thought it was pretty normal...

“...Fine. I’m not REALLY sure that I trust you, but just this once, I’ll believe you.” Her voice was cracking a little, and she was still looking away.

“I understand. Sorry. I’ll be back as soon as I can.”

“Y-You’re just my taste tester anyway! It doesn’t matter whether you’re here or not! I’m gonna practice cooking a lot, so... come back as soon as you can, okay?”

“Yeah, got it.” I nodded firmly and left Nozomiya.

Tsumiki never did say goodbye. She didn’t even turn around.

Had I said something to upset her? I couldn’t help but wonder as I got home. I needed to get ready, and fast.

“I’m back!”

“Oh, welcome back, Rekka! Will you eat first? Or would you like to take a bath?”

Harissa’s slippers flapped against the floor as she ran towards me. Her bunny apron was hopping left and right.

And then all of a sudden... Grrrumble!

Her tummy growled adorably.

“Oh! Oh, no, how embarrassing!”

Harissa’s face was bright red as she covered up the bunny on her apron with both hands. It was as if the bunny had made a noise. It was kind of cute.

“I told you on the phone that I’d be late, right? You should’ve eaten without me.”

“Yes, but... I wanted to eat with you, Sir Rekka.”

Her face was still red as she fidgeted and fiddled with the edges of her apron. It made me happy to hear her say that, but I also felt a little guilty.

“I’m sorry. I have something really important to do. I have to leave right away.”

“What?!” Harissa’s cry was more in shock than protest.

“I’m really sorry.”

I threw off my shoes in the front hall and grabbed a large rucksack from one of the shelves. I stuffed it mostly with water and food—supposedly it was a long way to the bottom of the earth. And just in

case, I grabbed a spare pair of shoes and a flashlight, along with anything else I thought I'd need.

I thought about taking the Hero's Sword, but decided against it. I still didn't know how to use a sword, and that thing could only cut through magic. It wasn't for slaying real monsters. It wouldn't really work well with my magical girl power either, and I figured it was probably best not to take anything that wasn't necessary.

"Oh, man, I've gotta hurry."

I slung the rucksack over my shoulder and headed for the front door. Harissa was waiting for me.

"Sir Rekka. I know you're busy, but where are you headed at this hour?"

She must've been worried about where I was going, given the way I was acting. Her eyebrows were arched and she was staring at me uneasily.

"Um..."

If I told Harissa I was going underground to fight a monster, she'd probably say she wanted to come with me...

I'd have to use my last resort.

I slid past Harissa, slipped my feet into my shoes, and ran out the door.

"Wait! Sir Rekka!"

"You don't have to make food for me until I come back! See you later!"

"W-Wait! Waah!"

As she tried to follow me, Harissa tripped. It hurt to watch her fall to the ground, but I was doing this to keep her safe. I swallowed my tears and kept running.

Of course, the sack was so heavy that I ran out of steam pretty quickly.

"Hahh, hahh, hahh..."

To be sure, I turned around to look, but didn't see Harissa anywhere. I decided to walk the rest of the way.

▽

I was surprised to learn there was a path to the underground in the mountain behind the school, but I was even more surprised how hard the path was to follow. There were plenty of steep inclines and rocks of all sizes, so it was practically all I could do to keep myself from tripping all over the place. Even with Bah's magic lighting up the area, it was dark, cramped, and mentally exhausting.

A ways into our journey, however, the ceilings got higher and the pathway widened. With more room to walk, it wasn't as bad as some of the other stretches. But according to Tetra, the walls here were

fragile, and we needed to watch for falling rocks that might hit us. We still couldn't let our guard down.

"How long have we been walking...?" I asked nobody in particular.

"I think it's been about ten hours..." Satsuki was pretty tired, too.

"Hahh... Hahh..." Tetra was barely even able to breathe anymore, let alone answer me. She looked like she'd be more used to the underground, but she didn't have any strength.

"Hang in there, guys," Bah said.

"Rekka, the only male characters who are allowed to be weak are pretty boys," R added.

It was easy enough for her to say since she was floating. Who asked her, anyway?

"Man, it would be so much easier if I could transform into a magical girl."

This subterranean path was treacherous enough for me to put aside my pride. And if I transformed, I could probably carry both of them...

"Like I said before, I don't recommend it. The magical girl ensemble is intended for one short, final battle. Just using it drains your physical and magical energy. You should hang in there as long as possible," Bah warned.

If only he'd made me something with better fuel efficiency...

Damn, this was hard.

"I'm amazed you made it up to the surface after you lost your light and food, Tetra. You had to walk uphill to get there, right?" I asked Tetra with as much respect in my heart as I could muster.

"Y-Ywes!"

"Sorry. You don't have to force yourself to talk."

"Hahh... Hahh... No... I wanted to save the village... Hahh... Hahh..."

Both her head and her limbs were shaking a little, and her eyes were blurry and out of focus. We were taking regular breaks, but she'd been like this for the past few hours.

Even so, it was this diminutive girl who wanted to hurry more than anyone.

"You really do care about your village, huh?"

"Hwath?"

"No, never mind. I was talking to myself."

Both Tsumiki and Tetra were carrying such heavy burdens on their tiny little shoulders. I wanted to help them as much as I could. I wanted to save both of their stories. I really did.

But just then...

Bah's light went out abruptly.

“What? What happened?!”

“Is it Leviathan?!”

We started to panic in the sudden darkness, when… Clatter!

Maybe it was coincidence, or maybe it was just good karma, but I heard the noise in time.

“Watch out!”

“Huh?!” Satsuki raised her voice in surprise.

It was enough for me to tell where she was, and I leaped forward to knock her out of the way. The crashing sound of falling rocks hit my ears just a few moments later.

“Oww… Satsuki, are you okay?”

“Oh… yeah. Um, Rekka… You’re really close.”

As my eyes adjusted to the darkness, I could see Satsuki’s face right in front of mine.

“Wah! Sorry!” I quickly jumped off of her.

“It’s okay...” Her voice was like a whisper as she gently stood up. She wouldn’t look at me at all.

Gyah, how awkward!

“Tch. Just needed another centimeter, huh?”

R, shut up! And what difference would a centimeter have made?!

“Wait, that sound...” I turned around.

Just like I thought, a rock had fallen from the wall and landed right where Satsuki was standing.

I was glad I was able to react so quickly... I should’ve thanked my ears for being so sharp.

“Rekka! Satsuki! Are you okay?”

“I’m fine. What about you two?”

Tetra’s eyes had begun to shine in the darkness, and I could see her and Bah coming toward me.

“Bah, what happened to the light?”

“Sorry, sorry. I got a bug in my eye.”

“Huh? Seriously? A bug? Come on, be careful!”

And then, a scraping sound...

“Wh-Who’s there?” Maybe my senses were heightened after what had just happened, but I responded instantly to the noise behind me.

“Aah... Aauuh...”

“Oh?”

Where I thought there would be an enemy, there was just a cute voice—one I knew quite well.

A moment later, a flame the size of a fist appeared in the air and illuminated the underground passage.

And from the darkness stepped—“H-Harissa?”—the young sorcerer that I thought I’d left at home.

She had used her invisibility spell to follow me this whole way.

“I-I’m sorry! You were acting strange, and I got worried... so... I’m sorry.”

“...No, I should’ve explained myself. Sorry.”

I didn’t want to get Harissa caught up in a dangerous story, but I’d managed it anyway. Was I an idiot?

“Well, I guess there’s nothing we can do about it. We can’t exactly send Harissa back on her own in this place, can we? She didn’t mean any harm, so let’s take her with us.”

“Honestly, I wish you’d stayed home, too, Satsuki.”

Of course I didn’t want to put my childhood friend in danger either. Things were already getting pretty dicey.

“I’m the one who brought Tetra to you. I’m following you whether you like it or not.”

“Ugh...” There didn’t seem to be much point in saying anything else, so I just shrugged. “Fine. Harissa, it’s dangerous, so don’t get too far away from me.”

“R-Right! Thank you, Sir Rekka! And thank you, Satsuki!”

Sheesh... It was hard to stay tense seeing how excited Harissa was.

Well, when I had to fight the Monster, I could still do it by myself. Everyone would be safe that way.

“Okay, Harissa, can you light the path the rest of the way? I don’t trust Bah to do it anymore.”

“Haha... That’s so mean.”

“I’m serious, though. So yeah, it’s your job now, Harissa.”

“Right! Leave it to me!” Harissa responded energetically and summoned a larger ball of flame from her staff. The fire lit up a wide area of the passageway, and I could finally see my feet clearly.

And so the four of us (plus one animal) headed further down the tunnel where we would reach our destination several hours later.

Chapter 3: Prayers and Betrayal

"All right, let's go slay this monster!" Bah's voice was still cheerful when we reached Jizu Village, but...

"Not happening..." I said.

"My calves are so stiff..." Satsuki said.

"I can't stand up without holding my staff..." Harissa said.

Tetra just panted.

By the time we reached the mole people village, we were all far too exhausted to go fight any monsters.

"Hmm... Well, the seal's weakening, but it's not going to break any time in the next day or two, so I guess it's safe to take a rest."

"You can tell, Bah? We're still at the entrance to the village, right?"

Tetra had said that the Hall of Sealing was in the temple at the back of the village.

"I can get a basic idea, yeah," Bah replied.

Well, I wanted a break anyway, so I wasn't going to complain.

We entered Jizu Village, feeling a little better. It was a small settlement in a cavern that opened up underground. It almost gave the whole village the feeling of being inside a huge gym.

The domed roof buildings were made of stone and dirt. There weren't a lot of them, and they were all small.

"There aren't many people here," I said to myself as I walked through the town.

"That's right. The village can't get any bigger than the cave, so the population just naturally doesn't grow." Tetra looked a little upset when she spoke.

"By the way, what is it that's illuminating this village? It's not fire, and can't be electricity..."

Now it was Tetra's turn to explain.

"The light has no source. It's a blessing from God. The whole village is always surrounded by light."

"What do you do when you want to sleep?'

"Huh? We close our eyes."

I guess they just got used to it.

A man—probably a villager—approached. We bowed a little to each other, and then he kept walking. He just took a glance at us and went his way.

"...That's a very different response than from when I was in the

other world."

Everybody had stared at me then.

Tetra and the villagers were quite pale, but the sun had tanned our skin and made it a different color. He should've been able to tell instantly that we were outsiders. Did he just not care about other people? As I pondered this, Tetra halted at the head of the line.

"This is the Jizu Village shrine."

"Huh..."

I looked up at the building, which was significantly larger than any of the others.

It reminded me of a smaller version of Greek temples that I'd seen in history or art books. But it was still much bigger than the other houses, and there were carvings on the roof and pillars. The materials it was made out of didn't seem to have been excavated from underground.

"It's like someone just brought this down here."

"There was a time I tried to research it, although I didn't learn much. This is another one of God's blessings, so I think that might have something to do with it."

"I see."

I was still a little curious, but more than anything else, I just wanted to rest.

Since there wasn't any kind of inn in Jizu Village, we decided to rest in an open room at the temple. Tetra ordered the villagers to bring us beds, then escorted us to the room, but...

"Um, Tetra... Is there only the one room?"

"Yes."

"And it looks like there are only two beds, yeah?"

"I'm sorry. These are the only two spare beds in the village."

Well, it was a small village. Maybe that couldn't be helped. I wasn't exactly going to get upset at Tetra over the way we were being treated. But...

"....."

"Ooooh... Ahhh..."

Satsuki and Harissa were staring at the beds so intently that it was scaring me.

"All right, everyone. Good night."

Tetra bowed and quietly left the room. Nobody said a word until she shut the door.

But the silence didn't last long.

Satsuki turned to Harissa with the most serious look imaginable on her face.

"Harissa, you don't want to sleep in a cramped bed, do you? Rekka and I will sleep next to each other."

“No! I’m tinier, so it makes sense for me and Rekka to sleep in the same bed...”

“It’s fine. When I was a kid, I used to sleep with Rekka all the time...”

“My family was poor, too, so I’m used to sharing a bed with my siblings...”

“No, I insist.”

“No, *I* insist.”

They continued to argue.

“I’ll sleep on the floor, so you guys can each sleep in your own bed.”

I tried to compromise, but...

“You’ve gotta fight the Monster tomorrow, right? You can’t get a good night’s sleep on the floor.”

“That’s right. You don’t need to do that, Sir Rekka... Honestly, I’d prefer to sleep in the same bed...” Harissa trailed off, mumbling as her face turned bright red. What was that about?

Either way, my plan was shot down.

“Okay... I’ll go outside for a minute. You two decide.”

I quickly left the room. If I had stayed, they probably would’ve asked me to decide who I wanted to sleep with.

For the moment, I was just going to wander around and try to find a spot to sleep.

“Rekka, I think you’re allowed to be a little more of a pervert,” R sighed as she floated through the air next to me. “Or perhaps all three of you could sleep together.”

“I can’t do that!”

“Please do. And then do what comes naturally, too. Otherwise, I can’t finish my mission.”

“It’s not that easy... Huh?”

As I spoke with R, I entered a larger room in the temple. Tetra was standing silently in the room’s center.

“Tetra?”

“Oh, Rekka. What’s wrong? Can’t you sleep?”

“Nah, something came up before I even got to think about it.”

“...?”

Tetra just looked confused. But yeah, I guess she would. I barely understood it myself.

For no reason in particular, I entered the great hall.

“By the way, what is that?” I sat next to Tetra and pointed to what she’d been staring at.

It was something in the center of the room—a statue of a goddess and a box. The box was rectangular, shaped like a coffin without a lid. It was engraved and affixed to the floor, so it had probably always

been there. The goddess was on top of the coffin, holding a sword.

It was a temple, so it was only natural to have a statue of a goddess... but the coffin and sword made it look like somewhat of a haphazard monument.

“This is another of God’s blessings. If you put food or clothing into this box and pray, whatever you put inside will multiply.”

“Seriously? That’s amazing.”

That really did sound like a divine miracle. It was amazing that there was light underground, too, but that was a little dull, to be honest.

“Can I use this, too?”

“No. This was made by God for the benefit of the guardians, so only we can use it.”

Too bad. If I could’ve put some tea and Japanese snacks into it to get more of them, I could have taken a break and relaxed a bit. It would have been nice to get rid of some the fatigue that had been building up lately.

Tetra told me more about the coffin. Apparently, the more people that prayed, the faster the things inside would multiply. And there was no limit to how much. As long as they kept praying, the contents would keep increasing in number.

For generations, Tetra’s clan had been in control of this coffin. She said she’d learned all of this through the old scrolls and books she found on her own.

“Once every seven days, the village gathers at the temple to pray for all the food, water, and clothing we need. It’s the most efficient way of making sure everybody gets what they need.”

In the past, each person prayed for what they wanted individually, supposedly. But when everyone prayed for themselves, people had to wait in line. And if you let something spoil, you could only get more of the spoiled thing. That’s why Tetra had decided that they would all get together and pray, then hand out what each person needed.

“It’s hard being the daughter of the village chieftain, huh?” I said, impressed.

I meant it as a compliment, but Tetra looked down.

“I wish I could bring more life to the village... I had hoped the rule I made about praying once every seven days would make everybody feel like part of a group. But it wasn’t that easy.” Tetra rubbed the edge of the box with her finger. “This coffin is what keeps us alive, but it has stolen from us any reason we had to work hard to survive. It gives us food and clothing—everything we need.”

“...Aren’t any of the villagers helping you?”

I thought it was an obvious enough question, but Tetra shook her head.

“The village is infected with tens of millions of years of laziness. This is a village of living corpses. Even with what’s going on now, only myself and a few other young people are interested. The adults—even my dad, the chieftain—won’t try to do anything.” Tetra sighed a little as she spoke.

She’d probably given up on asking the villagers for help. She’d worked so hard without anyone’s support... She must have been really tired.

She’d exhausted herself working all alone, and maybe she’d abandoned hope of the village ever getting its energy back, but still... She’d come to the surface and asked us for help saving the village she loved.

And then I wondered...

Was Tetra’s story really about defeating the Monster Who Defied God? Sure, if it came back to life, the village would be destroyed, and she wouldn’t want that, but... Wasn’t the soul of Jizu Village what she really wanted to save? That she wanted me to save?

Of course, this was just a theory. Tetra hadn’t said anything about it, but what if that was because she couldn’t? What if she was so exhausted and defeated that she couldn’t even say what she wanted? What if she was keeping her real desire sealed away in her subconscious?

Shouldn’t I try to help her? I didn’t know how, but...

“I think you’re trying really hard, Tetra.”

“Rekka... Even if I am...”

“So I’ll help, too.”

“Huh?” Tetra looked up at me, shocked.

That’s right. She was so petite that she had to look up at me when she talked. Even if the calm way she acted and spoke made her seem grown-up, she was just a normal girl.

She was really just trying to save her hometown. And she was doing it all on her own.

Talking to her, I realized how tirelessly she’d been working, but it felt like she was trying too hard for just one person.

Wouldn’t it be okay... for her to rely on somebody else? Me, for instance.

“Well, first we have to get through the Monster Who Defied God tomorrow, but even when that’s over, if your story isn’t resolved, I’ll stay with you. I still don’t know what it’ll take to help Jizu Village, but I’d never abandon you. Let’s try and work it out together, okay?”

I wasn’t very smart, and maybe I couldn’t do much, but when I laughed and told her that, her expression gradually changed. Shock turned to a quiet smile.

“...Thank you, Rekka.”

After I said good night to Tetra, I started to wander around the temple.

I mean, when I went back to check on the other girls, there was a note on the door that read, “Decide which of us you’re going to sleep with, please.” The two of them had each taken a bed already. Normally you’d run, right?

“You’re such a chicken that my stress is reaching supervolcano levels here.”

I ignored R’s meaningless words (though I kind of got the meaning) and kept walking with no real destination in mind.

Crap. I was getting really tired.

“Ugh… Maybe I’ll just sleep in the hallway.”

“Whatever you want,” the girl floating in the air next to me said coldly.

Was she that mad that I hadn’t slept next to one of the girls? But you know, sleeping with a girl in a cramped bed was a bad idea anyway. For a number of reasons.

Actually, I didn’t think I’d get any sleep.

Rrrrring! Rrrrring!

“Huh?” My cell phone was ringing? Down here?

Confused, I took my phone out of my pocket. But instead of a phone number, the display was showing hieroglyphs.

“…Is it broken?”

“Sure it’s not a prank call?”

“What kind of prank call would turn the numbers into hieroglyphs?”

I thought about ignoring it, but it wouldn’t stop ringing. It didn’t go to voice mail, and I couldn’t reject the call… so I gave up and answered it.

“…Hello?”

“Hello?! Rekka, are you alive?!”

A high-pitched voice rang through the other end—one I felt like I hadn’t heard in a long time. It was Iris.

“Iris? Where are you calling from? There were strange hieroglyphs on my phone.”

“Planet Finerita! I wanted to be able to talk to you whenever I wanted, so I had Daddy make me a cell phone that could call you anywhere in the universe!”

Space technology really was something else, huh? But since I couldn’t save her phone’s weird number in my contacts, it was going to be a one-way street.

“I’m getting the most advanced medical technology in the universe for you! I got a HUUUGE syringe fit for a space monster, too! They said it could even heal a planet-eating beast with one injection!

So don't die until I get there, Rekka!"

No, an injection from something like that would probably kill me...

"Wait, I'm actually..."

"Okay, I'm on my way back! Just wait for me, okay?"

Beep boop booooop...

"She didn't hear a word I said..."

"You'd think she'd realize that you answering the phone meant that you were okay. She must have been pretty worried. She's really in love with you, huh?"

"Blah blah blah!" I stuck my fingers in my ears and pretended I couldn't hear R.

As I continued to wander around, I decided to visit the Hall of Sealing in the back of the temple. I didn't really mean to do much there. I was just curious.

But when I arrived, someone was already there.

"Hey, Rekka Namidare."

"Bah."

It was the creepy-cute, super-deformed elephant fairy. He was flapping his ears in front of the giant door to the Hall of Sealing with an unsettling smile on his face.

Was it okay for a magical girl mascot to have such an evil-looking grin? I mean, it's not like I was really a magical girl either, but...

"What are you doing there?"

"Hm? Oh, nothing. I was just thinking."

It felt like he wasn't being totally truthful, but there must have been plenty on his mind in the face of a battle with an enemy he'd had for millennia.

I stood next to him and looked up at the door that marked the boundary between us and the sealed world.

It was immense.

There was no roof to the Hall of Sealing, and the door stretched all the way up to the ceiling of the cave. Because of that, even though we were indoors, it half felt like standing outside.

The engravings and decorations on the door were much rougher than the ones in the temple, and in places they were cracked. I could even hear the sound of the door cracking, and it was clear the seal was about to break.

Tomorrow, I was going to break that seal and go to the other side, wasn't I?

"You know, there's one thing I don't get."

"What's that?"

"Why did you want to ask me for help with the Monster?"

It was a simple question, but I was at a loss for an answer.

At first I thought it was because we had a mutual interest in defeating the Monster, but that didn't make much sense. I had nothing going for me other than the bloodline of the Namidare, and I couldn't come up with a good reason for him to help me do it.

But Bah just laughed. It was as if he felt I was asking an obvious question.

"It's because you beat the ultimate mage, Messiah Kyandistrapps, of course."

"Huh? Because I beat Messiah?" I gasped in surprise when I heard the name of the mage who'd put me through all kinds of misery last time. "No, wait. How'd you find out about that, anyway? Satsuki and I didn't tell anyone, and Messiah's not the type to go around talking about being bested, right?"

"The world of magic is a special place. Messiah may have been the strongest, but that doesn't mean there aren't lots of other talented mages. But only I know about Satsuki and the Magic of Omniscience, so don't worry about that."

From what he said, Bah had heard about Messiah's downfall and got curious as to why he'd been fighting in the first place. When he looked into it, he learned of the Magic of Omniscience and Satsuki's family.

Of course, that information was carefully protected with a great deal of safeguards and subterfuge. It was only his incredible power as "The Perfect Beast" that allowed Bahamut to break through it all.

He reassured me that even if other mages tried to do the same thing, they probably wouldn't get far. That made me feel better, but I still had to correct him on an important detail.

"Bah, I hate to say this... but I didn't beat Messiah because I was stronger than he was."

"You don't need to be so humble. Messiah is powerful enough that even I wouldn't want to fight him. He's not somebody a normal person could beat with a few tricks."

"But I am a normal person. You see..." I gave Bah a brief summary of how I'd taken down Messiah.

"...Then you lied and told him this alien meteor weapon was your own magic?"

"That's right. So, like I said, I'm just a normal human who can't use any magic. Wait, can't you tell by looking at me?"

Messiah was able to tell at a glance that I wasn't a mage, as I remembered.

"Determining if someone has magic, and how much they have, is a type of support spell. I'm specialized in offensive magic, so I can't really use spells like that."

"Fair enough."

Come to think of it, he had asked me when we met if I could use area of effect offensive magic. I thought it was some kind of joke, but it turns out he was just mistaken.

"I see... So you're really just an ordinary boy, huh?"

I felt a shiver as something cold ran down my spine.

Reflexively, I turned to the side to look at Bah... but he just stood there with the same creepy-cute smile on his face, no different than before.

"What's wrong, Rekka?"

"Nothing..."

Was I just imagining things? Something still didn't feel right, but just as I tried to convince myself otherwise...

The door to the Hall of Sealing suddenly started to rumble and shake.

▽

Leviathan had regained its power and was thrashing around on the other side of the door. At this rate, the seal could break at any moment... At least, that's what Bah said quietly to everyone when they gathered to see what the commotion was about.

"It's no sweat off my back, but I imagine you guys don't want Leviathan coming to this world, do you? So I think we should go immediately."

"Yeah, I guess you're right." I gulped and tried to steel myself after this dramatic change in our situation.

"You didn't sleep, Rekka. Are you okay?" Satsuki asked warily.

"I was waiting for you," Harissa said, upset.

...I wasn't able to steel myself quite like I'd hoped.

"Mmm! Wait, are you two really going to follow me?" I looked at them both again.

"Of course."

"I'll follow you anywhere."

Well, I figured that they'd said that... But wait, there was someone else.

"What are you doing here, Tetra?"

"I was the one who asked you to do this. I have a duty to see it through to the end."

"Wait, hold on..."

"I'm going no matter what you say," she said, smiling. "You said you'd stay with me. I can't let you go into that dangerous place alone."

"...!"

The pure look in her eyes pierced right through me, and I couldn't help but smile.

Why were all the heroines this time so stubborn?

“Rekka... you’re going to tell me all about this when we get back, okay?”

“……”

For some reason, both Satsuki and Harissa were glaring at me angrily. What now?!

“Bah, I just realized something. How are we going to cross the seal?” I turned to Bah, desperate.

Depending on how we were going to do it, there was still a chance I could leave them here. They’d probably scream at me later, but it was better than taking them into danger.

“This door can be opened from the outside as long as you follow the instructions. Of course, it takes a lot of power, so humans can’t do it on their own.”

...Which meant that once Bah and I went inside, it would stay open, huh?

I tried to think of some way to get the girls to stay behind, but I knew in my heart that even if I were to lock them up somewhere, they’d just use their magic to follow me somehow.

“Fine. But don’t do anything crazy, you guys.”

“Yes, I understand.”

“Right, Sir Rekka!”

“Okay.”

At least they were saying what I wanted to hear, even if they had no intentions of following through...

“Are you all set, then? Let’s get a move on.”

Bah started to chant a complicated spell.

▽

When we passed through the door to the other side...

“...Huh?”

We were back in the same temple.

“Bah, what’s going on here?”

“On the other side of the seal is a fake Earth made by God. You could call it an artificial parallel world, maybe? But since it’s not real, there’s no life and nothing grows. Also, this version of the temple will be aboveground.”

Um, so basically, it was a clever duplicate of the world we knew?

Just as Bah had said, when we left the (fake) temple, we were on the surface, not in Jizu Village. And it is a place I knew quite well.

“This is where our town is, isn’t it? There’re no buildings, so it feels kind of strange.”

“Right?”

Only when Satsuki spoke up did I finally realize...

There were no signs of life here. No people. No houses. No stores or roads... There was water and soil, but I couldn't see trees or anything green. There was light coming down from the sky, but nothing that looked like a sun.

"Well, as you can see, it's like our world, but in a very unusual way. The biggest difference is that time passes quite slowly."

"Huh. It's similar, but different... It's kind of bizarre."

And there was no noise, either.

It had never dawned on me before that a lack of life created a lack of sound... Although, I guess maybe it's weird to talk about "creating" an absence of something.

"I'd go crazy in three days in a place like this."

"Same."

"Me, too."

"I know I would."

And Leviathan was stuck in a place like this, huh?

"Wait, where is Leviathan? If it was trying to break the seal, shouldn't we have run into it right when we came through?"

"Maybe it decided to be cautious when we opened the door. It could be watching us, so you should transform, Rekka."

"Ugh... Fine."

Bah had a point, so I resolved that I had no choice but to raise my bracelet... even though I was really dreading it. This wasn't the time or place for me to be thinking selfishly, so I quickly transformed.

"Jeez, why do I have to say the spell, too? Kururun, Kururun, Kururinpyon! Kurukurupah, become an explosive magical girl!"

I recited the transforming incantation that Bah had given me as I waved my arm with the bracelet on it in a circle, and then followed it up with a victory twirl. I stuck out my tongue too for good measure.

TA
A
H!

And just as I was thinking I would rather be dead, my body was wreathed in a strange light.

“Bwahha!”

“Pfft! Heeheehee!”

“S-Sir Rekka, what is tha—bwahaha!”

By the time my transformation was complete, the girls were already in stitches.

I’ll say it again. I really just wanted to die. Seriously.

At least transforming into a magical girl made me physically stronger, so I wouldn’t be slowing down Bah this way.

Bahamut, “The Perfect Beast,” would be handling the majority of the fight. Realistically, it’s not like anyone but him could beat Leviathan, “The Strongest Beast.” I was just here as backup.

“So, yeah, Bah, I’m counting on you... Huh?”

Bah was gone.

“Hey, what’s going on? Where’d Bah go?”

“Huh? I-I don’t know!”

The three of them were so engrossed with my transformation that they hadn’t seen what happened to Bah.

We called out for him, but all we got back was silence.

“R, where’s Bah?” I whispered.

“I was watching your hilarious transformation sequence, so I don’t know.”

“Crap...”

Bah was a key player in this story. There was no way I could win without him.

The girls and I split up to search around the nearby rocks and things, but he was nowhere to be found.

“What do we do, Rekka?” Tetra asked me in a scared voice, but I couldn’t answer.

“...”

As I looked down in panic... Everything suddenly grew dark. An enormous shadow loomed over us.

“Satsuki! Harissa! Run!”

“!!”

“Huh? Wah! Wah!”

Satsuki responded by grabbing Harissa and jumping. She must have used some kind of levitation magic, because a single leap was all it took to get them out of the way.

“Oh, Rekka...”

“Uh-oh!”

Tetra hadn’t picked up on what was happening yet, so I grabbed her and jumped, too. Thanks to my considerably improved physical

abilities, I was able to get a good distance away, though in a different direction than Satsuki.

And while I was in the air, “It” came down from the sky.

It felt like a whole skyscraper had fallen down, but it was even more massive than that. It was a gargantuan, white snake that left a gaping crater in the ground where it landed.

“Leviathan!”

It was closer to a dragon than a snake, but it wasn’t any kind of dragon I’d ever seen. It had horns and wings, and its tail spread out like a fan. Its long, winding body was covered in a wavelike pattern. On top of its head was some strange, floating thing that looked like a pair of golden headphones. It truly did look like a monster from the age of gods. It was straight out of a fairy tale.

Damn it! Were we supposed to fight this thing ourselves? Why did Bah have to disappear at a time like this? I was furious and clueless, but I needed to deal with the obstacle in front of me first... no matter how big it was.

“Tetra, you stay here!”

“Rekka!”

She screamed, but I hid her behind a rock and headed toward Leviathan.

“Huh? Hmm...” R tilted her head in confusion as I ran.

“R, what’s wrong?”

“Hmm, I’m not sure. Maybe it’s my imagination.”

“What the hell?” Why was this girl from the future always saying weird stuff at the most important times?

“Satsuki! Harissa!” I screamed their names.

“Rekka!”

“Sir Rekka!”

They heard me and answered. Evidently they’d been looking for me, too.

They were both covered with dirt and dust, but not visibly injured. I was relieved.

“Rekka, what do we do?”

“To be honest, I’ve got no idea... but we’ll try and work something out.” I really didn’t have any idea, but this wasn’t the time to run away. “If I can’t stop it, you two take Tetra and get back to our world from the temple!”

“No way! I’m helping you.”

“Me, too!”

Come on! Why couldn’t they just listen to me for once?

“Good grief! Damn it... Then just don’t get close to the monster! Got it?” I shouted and kept going.

But the stupid skirt made it hard to run! I clenched my fist in

annoyance at the whole magical girl outfit.

And then Leviathan looked down at me with a head that was probably bigger than my house.

"You... were with 'him,' weren't you? Are you on 'his' side?"

Him? Who was it talking about? I didn't have time to think about it.

The explosive magic Bah had given me was extremely powerful. But would it work on such a huge monster? Just as I tried to use my stick to find out...

My transformation abruptly ended.

"Huh? What?"

My enhanced physical abilities apparently went with it. I fell forward, hitting my chin on the ground so hard that I saw stars.

"...Jeez. You really are just an average human, Rekka Namidare."

As I lay on the ground like an idiot, I suddenly saw Bah, the creepy-cute fairy who'd disappeared until a moment ago. He was holding my transformation bracelet in his stubby hands and playing with it.

"Bah... Why?"

"You see, at first I thought you were just being cagey and hiding your powers, so I put you in a situation where you had no choice but to use them... But I'm very disappointed, Rekka Namidare. You really don't have any more strength than other humans, do you?"

"Huh?" What was he talking about?

"Basically, he hid himself deliberately to test you." R saw my confusion and was nice enough to give me an explanation.

But I still didn't understand. If he wanted to see my power, he could've just fought alongside me. The girls and I almost got squished back there!

And then I remembered the chill I'd felt in the Hall of Sealing. I realized that was right after I'd told Bah that I wasn't special.

Had this been his plan ever since then...?

"...Bahamut. I never expected that you'd come to me."

I could hear Leviathan's hateful voice from above.

My body tensed up, but the Monster's eyes were fixed on Bah, not me.

"I've been waiting a long time to get my revenge on you," the Monster hissed.

"Oh, yeah? Then I guess I kept you waiting a while."

Leviathan's voice was seething with rage, but Bah seemed like he was having fun. He had a huge grin across his face like a giant gash.

"When I heard the seal was breaking, I got a little worried. I figured you'd regained most of your power. But seeing you in your current form, I feel a lot better. You've only got less than a percent of

your power back, don't you?

Less than a percent? And it was still this big?

Bah ignored my shock and laughed gleefully.

"Well, I'm curious how you managed to get back any power at all inside here where there's no food... but did you really plan to break through that old seal and fight me when you're still so weak? That's suicide."

"I decided I would atone for the mistake of unleashing you myself. No matter how much stronger you are, I will defeat you," the white snake said.

"Hahaha! Boy, do I feel stupid for going to all this trouble! I guess I'll just show you the difference in our power after all these ages." Bah laughed, and then turned to me with a grin. "So, Rekka Namidare, I'm taking back the power I lent you. I think I can handle Leviathan myself."

Bah tossed the bracelet into his mouth and ate it with a crunching noise. Suddenly his body began to change.

First, he grew to my height, but he was about three times wider. Then his limbs grew long, and five clawed fingers appeared on each hand. His nose, ears, and tusks grew, too.

He wasn't a little fairy anymore. He was more like... a demon.

"Gufwah!"

He put his hand on his protruding stomach, and snapped his long trunk at Leviathan, who was flying toward him to attack.

And then there was an explosion.

"Gyaaaooooh!" The giant snake writhed, and Leviathan screamed.

"Gufwah! Gufwah! Gufwah!" Each time his trunk moved, another series of explosions wracked Leviathan's body.

Blood poured out like waterfalls, and the stench of burning meat seared my nose.

Leviathan was blown back by the explosions, yet even covered in blood, it kept charging forward.

But it was hopeless.

Pillars of water appeared around Leviathan, then swarmed at Bah from all directions as if they had a will of their own.

But that didn't work, either.

Leviathan's desperate charges and pillars of water were all knocked away by Bah.

He hadn't budged since the start of the fight. He just stayed put and kept attacking.

I had thought this was exactly how I wanted to see things go down...

But for some reason, it was horrifying.

"Gaah... gyah... guh..."

At last, Leviathan was sapped of strength and could no longer lift its hulking body. As I watched in shock, the snake itself appeared to be collapsing.

“Oh, looks like it can’t maintain this form anymore.”

“…What do you mean?”

“Leviathan’s body, like mine, changes based on the amount of energy stored within it. So the more power we lose, the more difficult it is to maintain a certain form. I would guess that only the core is left now.”

“So it’s kind of like a balloon, huh?”

If the air (or energy) inside was what was causing it to swell up, as the air left, it was only natural that it would shrink. Then all that would be left was the deflated rubber. The rubber, in this case, would be the “core” that Bah was talking about.

“Well, something like that. Okay, time to find the core and destroy it.” Bah grinned and vanished.

I went to get Satsuki and the other girls, then ran after him.

When we arrived, we saw what clearly looked like a human girl lying at his feet.

“Bah! Who is that?”

“Hm? Oh, this is Leviathan’s core.”

“It is...?”

It was true that I’d been told that there was nobody here in this artificial world but the Monster Who Defied God. So no matter what she looked like, she had to be Leviathan.

In other words, even in human form, this was The Monster Who Defied God. The Strongest Beast that had once leveled the surface of the earth...

Which meant I had no choice but to watch as Bah finished her...

“Hmm...? I thought so.” R’s voice was oddly soft as she circled my head, staring at Leviathan.

I was unusually interested in what she had to say for once.

“Hey, what’s going on? What do you mean?” It was possible that the other girls might hear me, so I whispered as softly as I could.

“Nothing. It just looks like that girl is a heroine.”

“...Huh?”

“The girl lying on the ground there. She’s a heroine. At first I thought it had to be some mistake, but I guess it isn’t.”

“Huh?! Bah, hold it!” When I heard what she said, I yelled and started to run. I placed myself between Leviathan and Bah to protect her.

“Oh? What’s this about?”

“Well, uh...”

He narrowed his eyes into a piercing gaze directed right at me, and I broke into a cold sweat.

“Rekka! What’s going on?” Tetra and the girls were astonished at my sudden action.

To be honest, I couldn’t explain it. Was it just because Leviathan was in human form? Or was it because she was a heroine? It was probably both.

But... it was also true that something didn’t feel right about how Bah was behaving.

The way he’d reacted when he learned I didn’t have any power. The way his attacks seemed to be about maximizing his opponent’s suffering. And the peculiar nature of his conversation with Leviathan.

Bah had told us from the start that he wanted revenge, but Leviathan was the only one who’d said anything about revenge once we got here.

It was like the opposite of what we expected.

And just as I was about to ask...

“...Yup. Forget it.”

His attitude suddenly changed.

“Rekka Namidare, I’m done with you. Die, please.”

The next words out of his mouth were a death sentence.

“What?!”

“Good riddance, you useless boy.” Bah’s trunk turned towards me.

Oh, crap! He was going to blow me up!

I tensed up, waiting for the worst.

“Rekka!”

And just at the same moment my field of vision was overwhelmed with flames from the explosion, I saw Satsuki block them with some kind of invisible barrier.

“Well, well. You can block that, huh?” Bah looked impressed.

“Running and protecting myself are the two things I’m good at!” Satsuki yelled.

Just as Bah laughed and tried to attack us again, Harissa returned with Tetra. And then...

“Ealim Nekram!” Harissa chanted a spell.

“Hmm? They disappeared?” Bah looked around in confusion.

It was as if he’d lost sight of us... Was this Harissa’s invisibility magic?! I’d never had it used on me before, but evidently the effects were mitigated for people under the same spell. The four of us, plus Leviathan, could still see one another.

Satsuki waved her hand as if to say “grab on to me.”

Harissa and Tetra latched onto her arms. I put the unmoving Leviathan on my back and then put my hand on Satsuki’s shoulder.

Next thing I knew, we started to float in the air.

Satsuki tried to head for the temple, but she grimaced when we heard Bah mutter, “Hmm, I guess I can just wait them out at the entrance.”

For the time being, we headed in the opposite direction just to get away from him.

Chapter 4: The “Monster Who Defied God” and the “Beast”

Satsuki set us down well away from the temple, probably around where Nozomiya would be if this were the surface.

“We should be far enough away, I think.”

“Just in case, I’ll leave the invisibility spell up.”

“Yeah, thanks. To both of you.”

When Bah attacked me, I was sure I was a goner. Without their help, I probably would’ve been.

Man, I was really useless when it came down to it, wasn’t I?

I’d lost the bracelet to Bah, along with any chance of resolving the two stories.

“I guess we’re back to where we started...”

I felt a great burden weighing on my shoulders again.

I’d hoped with a sidekick like Bah along this time that things might be easy, but my hopes had been betrayed. In more ways than one, too.

And now I had a new heroine to take care of.

We all looked at the red-haired girl sitting a good distance away from us.

Her body was covered in injuries and the tight-fitting combat outfit she wore was in tatters, but the light in her eyes was as strong as ever.

“...” She brought herself to one knee and glared at us. We’d been working with Bah until a moment ago, so it made sense that she would be wary of us.

But if she really was a heroine, I needed to help her story, too. And for that, the first thing I needed to do was...

“Satsuki, can you heal her?”

“Sure, but...” Satsuki nodded, but glanced over at Leviathan, who was still glaring at us.

She was probably worried that Leviathan wouldn’t accept the treatment. I figured it was up to me to persuade her...

“Um, I guess I should introduce myself, huh? I’m Rekka Namidare. This is Satsuki, Harissa, and Tetra. Should I call you Leviathan? We’d like to use magic to cure you, and then hopefully we can talk...”

“...Then answer my questions first.” Leviathan’s gaze alone made me feel tremendous pressure. “To begin with, who are you? At first I

thought you were with Bahamut, but I guess that's not the case. You don't seem like the guardians of the seal either. Most of you, anyway."

"Umm..." Did Leviathan not know what humans were? Is that where I needed to start my explanation? "Satsuki, Harissa, and I are creatures called humans."

"What are humans?"

I suspected as much...

"How am I supposed to explain what a human is...? I guess they're the most numerous creatures on the surface?"

I couldn't say "the smartest creatures" because it would have sounded like bragging. I wasn't exactly a shining example of human intelligence anyway.

But when Leviathan heard what I said, her eyes went wide. She slowly staggered to her feet and grabbed me by the shoulders.

"Are you saying there are a lot of them on the surface? How many?!"

"Ow! H-How many? I think there's like seven billion or something, but... you're really shaking me! It hurts! You're going to dislocate my shoulder!"

"Seven billion... Then the surface wasn't destroyed?"

"N-Not that I'm aware of, but... Oww! That really hurts!"

"O-Oh, sorry..." Leviathan let go of my shoulders, then stared off into space for a while as if lost in thought. Large tears began to well in her eyes as she finally whispered, "I see... The surface is okay. I'm so glad... I was sure he'd destroyed it all."

I still didn't know what her story was, but now I at least knew she was happy the surface was safe. If she was really the "Monster Who Defied God" that had destroyed the surface, would she be crying over that?

"Well, before you tell us about that, we need to heal your wounds. Satsuki, go ahead."

"Right."

Leviathan kept crying, but she didn't really resist as Satsuki worked her magic. Once she was in better shape, I waited for her to calm down and then tried to talk to her again.

"Um, Leviathan?"

"Call me Lea."

"Huh?"

"Call me Lea, human named Rekka Namidare. And you don't have to act so scared when you talk to me," Leviathan... Lea said with tears still streaming down her face.

"R-Right. Got it."

I wasn't sure why Lea had suddenly opened up to us, but I gave her a brief summary of what had happened.

I told her about the bloodline of the Namidare, as well as Tsumiki and Tetra's stories. I told her why we were working with Bahamut. And I told her the reason why we'd been suspicious of her.

After telling her everything, I could hear her grit her teeth.

"So he's still a master con man. How dare he call me a monster...!"

She trembled with rage for a moment and then took a deep breath.

"I'll tell you the whole story. About him, about me, and about my mistake—the reason I'm trapped here behind the seal instead of him." Lea closed her eyes as she slowly began to speak. "God made the Perfect Beast, Bahamut, and placed him above all living creatures. He was the king of the beasts, and was given life so that he could be eaten at the last supper before the apocalypse. But Bahamut was filled with greed. He was proud of his kingship, and destroyed the surface for his own pleasure."

"But Bahamut was made by God, right? So then why...?"

"I don't know what humans think, but God isn't perfect... As punishment, God pierced Bahamut with a spear he made himself, and then sealed him inside this false world. After the sealing, he was called the "Monster Who Defied God," and a clan of guardians was placed by the Hall of Sealing to keep watch over him."

Tetra was listening to Lea's story carefully.

"...So the Monster Who Defied God in our legends is Bahamut? But then why did you take his place?"

"Yes... I'm about to tell you that." Lea took another deep breath and paused for a moment.

It probably had something to do with the "mistake" she'd mentioned earlier. The look on her face was that of a repentant sinner.

"Bahamut was sealed away, and I was created as a new offering to God. This time, God gave his creation great wisdom, self-control, and emotions so that I wouldn't destroy the surface. Just like God intended, even though they called me 'The Strongest Beast,' I lived peacefully. However..."

"...However?"

"My heart... It was weak," Lea whispered in a voice so hushed that I could barely hear her.

"My power was too strong. I couldn't get close to anyone, and no one could get close to me. But my heart was weak, and I couldn't bear the loneliness... I took this form so that no one would recognize me, and went to Jizu Village where the seal was located."

"Why?"

"...To meet Bahamut."

Everyone was shocked at this sudden development. Lea had gone

to see Bahamut on purpose?

"I thought that since Bahamut's power was equal to my own, he wouldn't fear me... That he would be my companion. I wanted desperately to believe that. I was weak and foolish back then." She laughed bitterly at herself. "From his perspective, the perfect prey fell right into his lap. He was more than happy to talk to me and be kind to me. As we spoke through the sealed door, I started to take pity on him. And I started to blame God for sealing him away. That's why I broke the seal when Bahamut asked me to."

"But..." Tetra was shocked.

It was true that if someone had the same kind of power Bahamut did, it would be possible for them to open the seal from the outside. That was probably why Bahamut had chosen to use her.

"You can imagine what happened after that. He passed through the door, locked me in here, and then sealed it closed again."

"He was afraid of you because you had power like his, right?" Harissa chimed in. She was probably right.

"...Yeah. It looks like what she's saying is true."

Satsuki used the Magic of Omniscience to verify her story. Even without reading through tens of millions of years' worth of records, she now had enough information to narrow down her search and get to the heart of the matter. The truth.

The short of it was that Bahamut had used Lea for all she was worth, then locked her in here so that she wouldn't pose a threat to him.

We were finally getting the real story.

"Just hearing that is enough to piss you off, huh?"

I was angry, but Lea was almost timid.

"No... It was all a result of my weakness. I was sure that Bahamut was going to destroy the surface for his own satisfaction. It seems you were lucky enough that that didn't happen, but my own selfishness still put the surface in danger."

"No, that's..."

I wanted to tell her it wasn't her fault, but her sharp gaze cut me short.

"I regretted it for so long. While I was trapped in here, I had dreams of him destroying the surface again and again. Time passes slowly in this world. Every second I wasted here, my thoughts were of all the lives that were being lost. I wondered if anyone had survived, or if there was even a world left out there. I had no way of knowing."

Lea looked up to the heavens, her eyes filled with resolve. The sky was bright and hazy, but there was no sun. Beyond it was the surface —the real one.

"As long as he's free, the surface could still be destroyed at any

moment. That's why I will do what it takes to defeat him. Even if it costs me my life."

Lea stood up and glared in the direction of the temple where Bahamut was lying in wait, then started to walk.

Seeing the same sad resolve in her eyes, I quickly stood in her way.

"W-Wait! You don't have to go by yourself, right? I'll help you! And if I'm strong enough, I'll think of something! So don't do anything stupid!"

"This battle is my responsibility. I can't get you involved."

Lea tried to push us away.

Fighting alone would be her way of atoning. I could tell that what she was thinking.

But I stopped her anyway.

"You can't win! Did you forget how badly he trounced you back there?"

"I still have to do this."

"...You! All of you!"

Tsumiki, trying to save Nozomiya.

Tetra, trying to save Jizu Village.

Lea, trying to defeat Bahamut.

They were all so stubborn because they didn't want to make their parents worry, or they had given up on relying on the villagers, or they didn't want others to get hurt...

And yeah, I got all that, but...

But come on!

"I said wait!" I grabbed Lea by the arm and pulled her back.

"What are you doing...?"

"I just told you about my bloodline, didn't I? You're my heroine now. Without me, your story will never reach a happy ending."

"...But you were just caught up in this by chance, right? I don't want that." Lea looked at me with eyes that were still keen, but tinged with sadness. "I thought the surface had been destroyed because of me, but I was wrong. You humans have lived and thrived up there... I can't even tell you how happy that makes me, or how much I love all of you for that. Words fail me. That's why I couldn't stand to see you hurt."

Lea's words were filled with emotion, and I felt each one tugging at my heartstrings. I could tell that she really wanted to protect mankind. That included us. Her sincerity was obvious from her voice.

But...

"I know. But I don't care."

"What?"

"Why are all of you people trying so hard to do everything on

your own?!" The feelings that had been stewing in the pit of my stomach came roaring out. "Did you not hear what I told you? Even if I'm caught up in a story, I've got the ability to leave it if I want to. So if I decide to save you, or Tsumiki, or Tetra, that's what I want to do!"

I got a step closer to Lea.

"Maybe you're doing this because you're nice. Maybe it's because you feel responsible. But when you can't do something on your own, it's not wrong to ask someone for help. It's normal!"

Another step.

She was just a bit taller than me, so I looked straight up into her eyes.

"So let me help you. That's what I'm here for!"

"…"

Lea moaned softly. She opened her eyes wide and reeled as if she wanted to run away.

I grabbed her hand.

"You spent all this time in this empty place, blaming yourself, right? Maybe you can't help being scared of asking for help. But don't be."

It had been tens of millions of years on the outside. Since time passed even slower in this fake world, it must have felt like an eternity here alone.

Perhaps guilt had worn away at her heart until there was nothing left.

But that just meant I had to help her remember—remember how fragile she was. I just needed to remind her that she'd been so weak and lonely that she'd clung to Bahamut for help. I needed to remind her of how it felt to want to rely on someone.

Maybe it was the wrong choice once, but she wouldn't regret it this time. I wasn't about to let that happen.

"I'll never let go of your hand. If you're willing to believe in me, then squeeze back."

"……"

Lea said nothing for a while. But I didn't let go.

And eventually, I felt a hesitant strength in her hand. She was clasping my hand back.

"…Are you really going to help me?"

There were tears rolling down her cheeks. I hadn't wanted to make her cry, so I decided to try and lighten the mood.

"Looks like that's becoming my specialty lately."

I chuckled a little…

"So leave it to me."

And nodded as reassuringly as I could.

Chapter 5: Connecting the Threads

My initial hopes that things would work themselves out this time had long since been dashed. Bahamut had betrayed me, and all my stories had run into dead ends. I was back to square one with each of them.

I mean... I guess it could have been a lot worse.

But if I had to start over, the first thing I needed to do was come up with some solutions.

"Lea, does Bahamut have any weaknesses?"

"I'm afraid not." Lea shook her head. "He's 'The Perfect Beast.' Just like the name implies, there's nothing about him that you could consider a weakness."

"Hmm... I see."

Well, so much for that then. I started to wish God hadn't handed out the title "perfect" so easily.

"Why don't we find a way back home first? If Bahamut traps us here, we're doomed."

"Oh!" I gasped when I heard what Satsuki said.

"No, there's no need to worry about that," Lea interjected.

"What do you mean?"

"When he locked me in here all those millennia ago, our powers were equal. That's why he didn't want to fight me. But now, it's obvious that he's the stronger. He can be sneaky, but he's the type to eliminate any potential threats."

"...Man, he's got a nasty personality, huh?"

"We need to find a way to beat him quickly, no matter what."

As we began to discuss potential plans...

"Um..."

"Hm?"

Tetra reluctantly raised her hand.

"I do know one thing—one weakness Bahamut has."

"Huh? Seriously?!" I grabbed Tetra without even thinking.

"Yes. I discovered it when I was reading about the old traditions in the village, so I'm pretty sure it's true, anyway... I think it was left by God."

"?"

Why was Tetra being so hesitant? If she was onto something, it would make a big difference for us.

...No, wait. Something wasn't adding up.

She'd told me at Nozomiya that the method to reseal the Monster had been lost. Why would she lie to me after coming to me for help? And that wasn't the only thing that didn't make sense.

After we first talked to Tetra, I'd asked Satsuki to use the Magic of Omniscience to look into the traditions she was talking about. But Satsuki had also said that it required a special tool that no longer existed.

And if that special tool really wasn't an option, why would Tetra bring it up now? That would mean it was still possible to restore the seal.

So why would Satsuki lie, too? I had a lot of questions, but I waited for Tetra to explain.

And when she did...

"Bahamut's weakness is... the blood of my clan."

She gave us the worst answer I could've imagined.

"Wh-What...?"

"..."

I was shocked, but Satsuki just stared silently at the ground.

"The blood of the guardians will cause his body to burn and rot. If it gets inside him, it will act like a fatal poison. God made us explicitly to kill Bahamut," Tetra continued. "There's no sustenance here in this artificial world, so if Bahamut ever managed to destroy the seal, he would be hungry. And the guardians who live right next to the Hall of Sealing would be the first food he saw... Really, we were a trap that God set for the monster who defied him."

"Are you saying... God made your village just so that Bahamut could eat it?!"

"Yes. Do you remember the coffin and the statue of the goddess with the sword in the temple?"

"Y-Yeah..."

"That sword is a reminder that if there isn't enough blood, we're to use it to run ourselves through and multiply the blood in the coffin."

"What?!"

I instantly hit my limit. I felt the rage boil up inside me with nowhere to go. Unconsciously, I clenched both fists.

He made life just so that it could die? That's messed up! And on top of that, he wanted them to kill themselves?! Hell no!

Lea had said that God wasn't perfect. She was right. There's no way an asshole like that was omnipotent.

I understood why Satsuki had lied to me. She couldn't tell me... just like Tetra couldn't. Tetra wanted to save her village. She wouldn't do something that meant sacrificing it.

But that meant the reason she was telling me now...

“So if I let Bahamut eat me…”

Yup. That was why.

“You dummy. Nobody’s letting you do that.”

“But there’s no other way.”

“I’ll come up with something. I’m thinking now.”

“But as long as the Monster is guarding the temple, we can’t leave this place. So…”

“Shut up.”

I’d rather die than do something so cruel. And besides…

“You’re trying your best to be brave, but your knees are shaking. I can’t let you do that.”

“!”

“Tetra, you need to stop trying to handle everything on your own, too. The problems of the world don’t fall on your shoulders alone. Trust in me and everyone else. If you want to make Jizu Village a better place, then talk to the villagers. Don’t give up on going to them for help. And for now, let’s figure out a way to beat Bahamut.”

After telling Lea what I really thought, it was easier the second time. Things were looking pretty bad, but I was feeling pretty good.

That’s right. There was no reason to give up.

We could all put our heads together and come up with a way to beat that “Perfect Beast” asshole.

“…You’re right.” Satsuki suddenly raised her head. “Lea, you said that before Bahamut was sealed away, God impaled him with a spear, right?”

“Yeah.”

“Do you know exactly where he was stabbed?”

“I… I think it was in the back.”

“All right. Just give me a second…”

As Satsuki closed her eyes and began to concentrate, I finally realized what she was getting at.

Until now, we’d only been thinking about how God had sealed away the Monster. But Satsuki was onto something. He hadn’t just been imprisoned; he’d been defeated.

If he did have a weak point, this had to be the hint that would lead us to it.

“…I found it. There’s a spot on Bahamut’s back where God’s spear pierced his hide, and it’s still bleeding.”

I then remembered the oversized bandage that was on Bahamut’s back when he was in his fairy form. It had totally slipped my mind, but that must have been how he was hiding the wound.

“But how can we use that to defeat Mr. Elephant?”

Really, Harissa? “Mr. Elephant”? Wasn’t that a little too cutesy of a nickname for him?

But she had a point. A wound was just a wound. Without some way to target it, it didn't do us any good.

Lea was the only one with the strength to fight Bahamut, but she had been trapped here, starving... No, wait a second.

"Come to think of it, Lea, how'd you get the power to break the seal recently?"

From what I'd heard, it had been weakening over the past few years, but Lea should have been too without any food. That meant that she shouldn't be any stronger than the seal, and yet somehow, it was almost broken now.

There had to be a reason.

"How I got my power back? It would be faster to show you," Lea said and started to lead us somewhere.

To be safe, we kept Harissa's invisibility spell up. We weren't taking any chances.

And Lea lead us... to a hole in the ground.

"Th-This is..."

"When I still had my strength, I used all my power to try and get out. I eventually ended up making this hole. I'd hoped to be able to leave this way, but as you can see, it's too small for me to get through."

Lea sighed. Her huge chest heaved up and down with each breath.

"....."

The other girls self-consciously looked down at themselves, but I said nothing. No way in hell was I going to get involved in that.

Harissa looked like she was crying, though. It's okay. You're only thirteen. You've still got room to grow.

Anyway, no one was getting through a hole that small, regardless of how tiny their breasts were... Well, I guess breasts weren't really the issue.

"The only thing I can say is that there's still demand for flat-chested girls in the future."

I said that had nothing to do with it! And why did R have to get involved whenever there was talk about boobs? Did she like them or something?

No, no. That wasn't what mattered here. Focus, Rekka. Focus.

What was important now wasn't the size of anyone's breasts—it was that this was definitely the hole that had opened up in Tsumiki's backyard. It had the same black aura. There was no mistaking it.

But how did this help Lea get her power back?

"Things from the surface come out here once in a while. I think someone on the other side is dropping them in, or maybe they just fall in on their own. It's mostly dirt, but lately, a dense energy source that I enjoy has been coming through."

Wait... “Dense energy source”? Not a moment later, the black balls I had been wondering about popped out of the hole.

Everyone stared, but Satsuki and I both groaned.

This terrible, demonic presence... It was unmistakably Tsumiki’s failed attempt at creative cooking. The very same “food” I’d taken to calling dark matter.

“Yes, this is it. The dense energy source I was talking about.”

“Wh-What...?”

I mean, I kind of figured that was the case when I realized this was the same hole as the one at Nozomiya. But even then, I couldn’t hide my shock that she was actually eating that stuff.

“Oh, my. So these were made by this Tsumiki girl you were telling me about?” Lea was astonished to learn where the dark matter had really come from.

“Y-Yeah. It’s a little surprising... I mean, it’s actually a big surprise, but knowing Nozomuno’s cooking, it’s possible.”

“Huh? But Satsuki... This is just bad cooking, right?”

“There’s not that much of a difference between cooking and alchemy. They both involve complex recipes, preparing and mixing ingredients... There’s no doubt that stuff Nozomuno made was a wretched poison.”

That’s right. Satsuki had said the dark matter felt like it had the ominous power of hundreds of sacrifices behind it.

I see. I didn’t know anything about magic, but it was starting to come together.

The reason we came here in the first place was because Lea was about to break the seal even when it still should’ve held. When we left, Tsumiki had said she was going to keep practicing. She’d probably failed and made more dark matter, then threw it down the hole for Lea to find.

Talk about a weird coincidence, though.

Who would’ve thought that Tsumiki’s dark matter was at the root of all these stories?

If we had enough of it, could Lea regain her strength and defeat Bahamut? But how...

“I dunno what made you think it was okay to eat that, honestly,” I said, half impressed and half shocked.

“I love bizarre foods. And when I found something with such concentrated nutrition—here, in this barren world—I immediately...!”

She suddenly fell silent and turned toward the temple.

I followed her gaze only to see a half-man, half-beast silhouette...

“Are you over here?”

“Get down!” Lea shouted over Bahamut.

The elephant’s trunk waved in our direction, causing a column of

fire to rain down from the sky—just in time for Lea to scarf down the dark matter and send out a pillar of water.

They collided in an explosion of steam.

"Gwaaah!"

"Haha! Is that the source of your power? Looks yummy! Give me some, too!"

I could hear Bahamut's jaunty voice through the curtain of steam.

Was he drawn to the dark matter, too? But if he was using a wide-area spell like that, maybe he hadn't seen us yet. At least that's what I thought, until...

"I-I'm sorry, Sir Rekka! The way their magic collided was so powerful that it dispelled my invisibility!"

"Seriously?! Then can you recast it...?"

"Not until the magical energy calms down! This spell is delicate!" Harissa was on the verge of tears.

This wasn't good. Even if Lea could repel Bahamut's magic, it would be harder to escape now.

And Lea was...

"Hyah! Take this!"

Her opponent appeared unfazed, but she was already gritting her teeth. She'd just gotten a new source of energy, but it wasn't nearly enough to stop Bahamut.

Would more dark matter restore her to her former glory as "The Strongest Beast"?

"All right, time to turn up the power."

Just as I heard Bahamut's voice, an even larger blast of flame roared through the steam and swallowed Lea's magic.

"Uwaaah!" Lea screamed and tried to resist.

For an instant, her summoned water pushed Bahamut's flame backwards. He quickly warded off the rest of her attack, but that instant was all she needed.

"Aaaaah!"

Just before the crimson pillar hit us, Lea managed to use her water spell to deflect it.

Thanks to her, we weren't burned to a crisp, but...

"Gweheh. You're leaving yourself wide open."

"?!" Lea had used so much of her energy that she was helpless as Bahamut ran up and kicked her with a leg the size of a log.

"Gwah!"

Lea's body bounced along the ground like a soccer ball and slammed into a boulder.

"Gwheh."

Bahamut's next target... was me.

A perfectly visible me, no less. Crap.

“Rekka!”

“Sir Rekka!”

Satsuki and Harissa readied themselves at the same time, but...

“You’re in the way.”

Bahamut’s words alone were enough to knock them back like they’d run into a huge wall.

“Bahamut!”

“Oh, I thought I told you to call me Bah.”

“Screw you!”

How long was he going to keep messing with us?

Bahamut snapped his claw-like fingers and raised the corners of his mouth into a grin.

“Oh, dear, Rekka Namidare. I wonder how those girls will react to your death.”

He sounded like he was enjoying this.

“...I have a question.”

“Hmm?”

“Was everything you told us a lie?”

“Of course.”

“Did you destroy the surface once?”

“Yeah, that was a great deal of fun.”

“...And what about that magical girl outfit?”

“I just wanted to screw with you, obviously,” Bahamut laughed.

Honestly, that pissed me off... but it wasn’t the thing that enraged me the most.

“It wasn’t a coincidence that your light went out and a rock almost fell on Satsuki’s head on the way down here, was it?”

“Of course not. She has the Magic of Omniscience. At first I was able to trick her about who I really was, but I would have been in trouble if she’d double-checked, right?”

“Then why didn’t you talk to me when she wasn’t around?”

“Hmph. I wanted to do that. But you know, Rekka Namidare... You found Tetra before me, and you had already heard her version of the story. For my plan to work, I had to show up when I did.”

It was true. He’d shown up at just the right time, and I’d been more than eager to accept his help.

Come to think of it, it really was too good to be to true. I should have known. I was just in such a tight spot that I’d relied on him without thinking.

Satsuki had almost gotten killed because I was so stupid...!

“You’ll pay for this!”

“Sure, sure. Whatever. Anyway, it’s time for you to die.”

“Huh?!”

All the blood had rushed to my head, and I was slow to react. The

next thing I knew, Bahamut was right on top of me, slashing at me with his huge claws.

There was no dodging them. I guess in the end, fighting a monster was a job for a hero or a god, and not a normal person, huh?

That's right.

I wasn't special at all.

In the face of sudden death, my limbs wouldn't move and my vision blurred. I was utterly useless.

And because of that...

"Rekka!"

All I could do was watch as Tetra pushed me aside and flung herself before the onslaught.

The Monster's claws bored into her shoulder.

"Aaah...!"

"Tetra!"

Her scream brought me back to my senses.

"Too bad. She got too close for me to hit hard enough. I was planning on ripping you open with that one," Bahamut said, yanking his claws out of Tetra.

Blood spewed forth as she fell backwards to the ground.

"Tetra?! Hey, hang in there!" I grabbed her, yelling her name.

"..."

There was no answer.

Her eyes were closed and her pale cheeks turned a ghostly white.

Don't tell me... No...! It wasn't possible!

As I held her in my arms, the elephant monster laughed. He was covered in her blood.

"What's wrong? Go on, run. If you don't hurry, her noble sacrifice will be in vain... Wh-Wh-Wh-What the HELL?!"

Bahamut's laughter was cut short by tormented screaming.

"Gyah! Gwaaah! What is this?! My body's so hot! I'm... I'm melting!"

Sure enough, his flesh was starting to smoke and dissolve as if someone had poured hydrochloric acid on him. But it was Tetra's blood.

"That's right!"

It was Bahamut's weakness. Tetra had said that the blood of a guardian would burn and rot his body if he came into contact with it.

Had she done this deliberately?!

"Tetra! You... You idiot! Why did you do that?"

"Huh...? Rekka?"

Tetra's eyes slowly opened as I screamed at her. She was alive... but her body was still getting colder! The wound hadn't reached her heart, but the bleeding wouldn't stop.

In a barely audible voice, she whispered, “I’m glad... you’re safe...”

She sounded so happy when she said it. It was as if nothing else mattered to her.

“You idiot! I’m not that important!”

“Don’t... Don’t say that. When you told me... that we’d help the village together... that we could all try and think of a way to save it... it made me really happy.”

Her breathing was shallow. I’d been putting pressure on her wound with my hands, but the blood just spurted out between my fingers. It wasn’t helping.

I carried Tetra over to Satsuki, ignoring Bahamut as he thrashed around in pain.

“Satsuki! Satsuki, wake up!”

“Mm... Rekka? Tetra! What happened?!”

“We’ll talk later! Just heal her! Harissa! Harissa, can you get up?!”

“Huh? Uh... Y-Yeah! I feel dizzy, but I’m okay...”

“Sorry for pushing you so hard, but Tetra’s in bad shape! Use healing magic on her with Satsuki!”

“R-Right!”

“Thanks!”

I didn’t even know basic first aid. There was nothing I could do. I just had to leave it to them...

“Right! Where’s Lea?”

I looked towards Lea, who’d been knocked some distance away. She was... She was okay! I could just make her out as she staggered to her feet. But even if I ran over to her, I couldn’t do anything for her either.

I was just going to have to rely on what I knew I *could* do...

“Bahamut!”

I clenched my hand into a fist and I started to run.

I ran toward the elephant monster, who was still clutching his burning face in pain.

“Gwfaaah...!”

Bahamut turned toward me, and I slammed my fist into his face.

“Gabh!”

“Damn, that hurt!”

His face was surprisingly hard. Hitting it busted open my knuckles.

But I didn’t care. I gave him another punch with my right arm.

Then I hit him with an uppercut to his huge jaw.

My fist smashed into the base of his trunk.

I was bleeding, and I didn’t like the sounds my bones were making at all, but none of it mattered.

I'd keep pounding on him until he went down.

"Take this!"

My fist was now completely red, but I couldn't feel it anymore. Instead, I felt the shock in my biceps and shoulder.

I was panting for breath. My throat was burning.

I didn't have any stamina. I didn't have any power. I didn't have any skill.

I didn't have a damn thing.

But I wouldn't stop punching.

My anger for this bestial asshole who had laughed at their lives—laughed at their stories—wasn't fading at all.

So I raised my bloody fist once more.

As empty-handed as I was, the least I could do was throw all of my energy into this punch—

"Don't... get... cocky!"

"?!"

BOOM! A sudden explosive wind formed around Bahamut, knocking me into the air.

"—!"

I felt my stomach jump up into my throat, and then my body started to fall straight down. I was looking upward, so I couldn't tell how high in the air I'd gone, but I knew I'd be dead meat if I hit the ground.

"Rekka. You know, now's the perfect time to yell 'I can fly!'"

"You've always been able to float, so shut up!" I yelled at R as I desperately tried to think of a plan.

But nothing came to me.

Just as I was sure I was about to hit the ground, I felt a heavy impact and someone grabbed me.

"Are you okay, Rekka?"

"L-Lea... You saved me."

"...I don't know about that," she whispered ominously as she set me down on the ground.

I quickly saw what she was talking about.

"What is that...?"

It looked like a lump of meat that was expanding. But upon closer inspection, I could see that it had legs, fangs, a trunk, a tail, and ears.

"Bahamut is trying to take his true form—the form of the Perfect Beast, the king who once devoured the world." Lea explained what was happening in a voice that was filled with tension.

It made sense when I thought about it. Bahamut was, according to Satsuki, big enough that he could cover all the land of the earth. His humanoid form was only a temporary one.

Until now, he'd just been playing with us.

But this unexpected counterattack had pissed him off... My little punches probably didn't do much, but the burns from Tetra's blood must have caused some serious damage.

Then a pair of eyes popped up from the lump of meat and turned to face us.

"Hahh... hahh... haaahh... gwahfah... Man, my head hurts."

I heard Bahamut's voice. There was a strange mix of suffering and excitement in it.

"Aah... When I take this form, it makes me want to destroy everything. You, this fake Earth, the guardians, the surface—everything! Gwahahahaha!"

"You bastard! I won't let that happen!"

"Gwabahkyah! Waah... aaah... But it's a shame I won't be able to go play at casinos, live a life of luxury, or trick people into the pits of despair anymore. You humans are almost as entertaining as destroying things."

So that's why Bahamut hadn't destroyed the surface after regaining his freedom. He hadn't changed his ways or repented. He'd just found a new source of amusement.

"And now you're going to destroy all that, too?"

"Bgyahahahahaha! You fool! It's just soooo much fun to destroy stuff! I was planning on waiting for you humans to grow even more arrogant and for your society to ripen even more. Then when you reached your peak, I was gonna destroy it all! It's all the more enjoyable to knock down a tower of blocks when it's big and tall, isn't it?"

So you're going to destroy the world again?! I stopped myself from screaming.

There was no point in asking. I could tell that Bahamut had gone off the deep end a long time ago.

There was no stopping him now. It didn't matter what I said. He wasn't going to stop until everything was destroyed.

Bahamut was already larger than my high school. And he was still getting bigger. He kept growing and growing, like some kind of bad joke.

As I watched helplessly, Satsuki, Harissa, and Tetra joined us. Satsuki and Harissa were helping Tetra walk.

"Are you okay, Tetra?"

"Yes... Sorry for worrying you."

Her voice was weak, but at least she answered me. I knew things weren't looking good, but I still felt relieved for a moment. I took Tetra from the two of them and carried her on my back.

"What are we going to do, Rekka...?"

"..."

Satsuki looked uneasy. I couldn't answer her.

"...You guys run away," Lea said suddenly, turning her back to the rest of us.

"Hey, you idiot, no! I just told you not to do it yourself!"

"I remember. But my hands are tied. At this point, I'm the only one who has a chance to stop him."

"But we're all going to do it together..."

"The wheel of time turns slower here than in the real world. If I can stop him for a day, that will buy you several hundred on the surface. You can use that time to find a way to redo the seal, or destroy the seal and this world along with it. Satsuki's Magic of Omniscience can do that, right?"

"Well..." Satsuki fell silent.

It was possible that with all the information in the universe, maybe we could do something like that. But...

"But then we can't save you!"

"Then come up with a plan to defeat him. Now. We're out of time."

"Tch...!" Lea's cold words left me with nothing to say.

Damn it. Come on, brain, think of something! I screamed at my useless self, but my mind was still blank.

And even as we stood there, Bahamut just kept growing monstrously large. He was already taller than a mountain. Was the only reason he hadn't crushed us already because he wanted to save our destruction for later? It had to be.

I'd hoped that as his body grew, so too would the wound on his back. But either he'd regenerated, or his body had swelled enough to cover it up. I couldn't see any suggestion of it now.

The full manifestation of Bahamut, "The Perfect Beast," was almost upon us.

But I couldn't come up with a plan. Not even a bad one. Damn it all!

"...If everyone up there is like you, the surface must be a wonderful place right now," Lea said as she turned toward me.

There was a gentle smile on her face that seemed totally out of place.

"Tsumiki... Was that her name? Tell her I said thank you. Without her cooking, I wouldn't even have the chance to fight... Come to think of it, she needed some of my meat, didn't she? If I survive, I'd love to give her some."

I could tell from the way she spoke that she didn't think there was any way she was going to make it.

"Don't worry about me, Rekka. This is what I want to do. Thanks to you, I can fight for hope, not hatred. I'll buy you every minute,

every second that I can. So please, go... Live. That is my last wish."

"Wai—?!" I reached out my hand, and grabbed nothing but empty air.

She leaped toward Bahamut, transforming in mid-air.

"Gyaaaoooh!"

Lea morphed into a huge, dragon-like sea snake. Her massive body shook as she howled and lunged for Bahamut. It was like watching a torrent bursting through a breached dam, but...

"Gugyahh!"

In the face of a "beast" bigger than a mountain, it was futile.

They say that just tiny drops of water can eventually wear down stone. But even if water can make a hole in the ground, it isn't enough to shake the earth itself. In other words, that's basically how this fight was going to go down.

This suicide charge! This useless death! This self-sacrifice crap! It was all just a waste of time! No matter how Lea felt, it was the worst decision she could've made, and it didn't make me happy at all!

Bahamut brought down his trunk, slamming Lea to the ground.

One of the wings on her back snapped. Her white body was now stained with blood and dirt. Yet she rushed Bahamut again. And was knocked down once more. Still, she got up again.

The battle between the Perfect Beast and the Strongest Beast shook the entire fake planet. A crack appeared in the white sky.

"Lea!"

"Rekka! Wait!"

I tried to put Tetra down and run toward Lea, but Satsuki grabbed me.

"Move, Satsuki!"

"No! What could you even do out there?"

"That's not the problem! I can't leave Lea!"

"That is the problem! If you want to save Lea, then think!"

Satsuki and I glared at each other. And then Harissa screamed.

"Sir Rekka! Satsuki!"

The earth began to shake violently. The ground underneath us vanished.

"?!"

Had we been swallowed up by an earthquake? I tried to scream Satsuki's name, but for some reason I couldn't. Actually, my whole body felt weird... like I wasn't really there. There was an indescribable sense of uneasiness in my mind.

After a few moments of wanting to throw up, it all subsided.

"...?"

I opened my eyes. And then...

"...Rekka?"

I saw Tsumiki and Iris looking at me in astonishment.

“...Huh?” I said in a voice like an idiot.

I looked around and saw that I was in the backyard of Nozomiya. Satsuki, Harissa, and Tetra were all looking around, unsure of what had transpired.

Iris was the first one to move.

“Rekka!”

“Gyeh!”

She gave me a hug that was more like a body slam and knocked me to the ground.

“I was so worried! I looked and looked, but I couldn’t find you anywhere! I had to ask someone! They said you went to this girl’s house and that you hadn’t been to school for three days! I was worried that Satsuki was right and some weird disease or curse had made you crazy!”

“No, no! Wait! Oww!” Iris was too strong, and I couldn’t pull her off. She must’ve been feeling really agitated, because her usually hidden tail was flopping about openly. “I’m okay! I’m just fine, see? So don’t worry about me, Iris! And hide your tail! Tsumiki’s staring!”

“Huh? Oh, you’re right. Okay!”

Iris’s tail quickly popped back under her skirt, but I saw a confused Tsumiki mouthing to herself, “Huh? Did I just see a tail…?”

“Wait, Rekka, are you sure you’re okay?” Iris asked again, looking worried.

“I’m fine, really… But more importantly, what am I doing here?”

Just moments ago, I was in the sealed, artificial world. And now I was back behind Nozomiya? What happened to Lea? Where was Bahamut? What was going on?

“It’s because you and I are tied together by fate, duh!”

“No, that’s not it!”

I was frustrated that my question wasn’t getting through, but things only got worse when Tsumiki came up and kicked me in the face.

“What are you doing flirting behind my house?”

“I am not flirting! Wait, that doesn’t matter! When did I get here, and how?! I’m so confused!”

“Huh? I’m the one who’s confused. I heard this big noise behind the store and came out to investigate just in time to see all you guys flying out of that hole.” Tsumiki raised a single, skeptical eyebrow. “Really, what’s going on here?”

“Hole…?”

The hole she pointed to—the one behind Nozomiya—was bigger than the last time I’d seen it. It was big enough for a person to pass through easily now.

“…I see.”

The fight between Lea and Bahamut had probably caused the seal to shake, expanding the hole that was already there. And then we’d fallen through it. That’s how we’d gotten back to the real world.

If that was the case, then we had to hurry. We needed to get back! I stood up and tried to go back through the hole… but Tsumiki

stopped me.

"Wait! Where are you going this time?"

"Please, let me go! I have to get back there! Now!"

"—!"

Smack!

Tsumiki slapped me across the face.

"Huh...?"

I grabbed my cheek in sudden pain, shocked. My head had felt hot for a while now, but it was starting to calm down.

Tsumiki glared at me.

"I don't care anyway! I don't care where you've been the past three days, or what you've been doing! It means nothing to me!"

She stamped her foot like she still hadn't made it clear how angry she was.

"I've been cooking this whole time... And I got a lot better! I don't need you anymore! You're fired as my taste tester! Fired! I can do this on my own. And you... You can just get lost!" She yelled with tears in her eyes.

"..."

Seeing her like this, I finally started to regain my composure.

Nothing I thought would work out had actually gone okay. I could barely put a scratch on Bahamut. Tetra had gotten hurt putting herself in harm's way to protect me. I couldn't even stop Lea as she went off to die.

I had been so infuriated at myself for being so weak, but now I was finally coming to my senses.

Time passed slower on the fake Earth than the real one. And because of that, I'd left Tsumiki alone for three days. I looked into her tearful eyes and said, "...I'm sorry. I said I'd be right back, but I kept you waiting."

"Shut up! Nobody... Nobody said I was lonely!"

Tsumiki kept trying to hide how she felt, so I pretended I hadn't heard her saying how lonely she was. But I figured she wouldn't want me to see her crying, so I silently let her rest her head against my chest. She could use my shirt like a tissue.

If I'd gone to join Lea and died, Tsumiki's story would've come to a bad ending, and she might've cried even more. The mere thought of it made me shudder. And it wasn't just Tsumiki. Without me, Tetra's story might not end happily either.

If I had acted rashly out of panic and anger, that wouldn't matter. But I couldn't get them involved in this.

"Rekka. You calmed down?"

"Satsuki... Sorry."

"It's fine." My childhood friend smiled back at my apology.

“Remember what you said, Rekka? We need to all come up with a way to solve this together.”

“That’s right, Rekka,” Tetra joined in. “I’ll help you, too. Even Lea’s doing her best to buy us time.”

“I want to help you, too, Sir Rekka!” Harissa added.

“I don’t really understand, but I’ll do whatever I can for you, Rekka!” Iris raised her hand.

“Wait a second. I really don’t know what’s going on here. What is going on?” Tsumiki looked confused as she blew her nose. She was the only person here who didn’t know what was happening.

Well, Iris didn’t know about their stories either... Suddenly, she looked at my hand and screamed.

“Rekka, you’re hurt! I need to treat you, quick!”

“Oh, um... Sure, thanks.”

“Leave it to me!”

Iris got out her futuristic bag capable of storing anything.

“I brought all kinds of things from planet Finerita to help you get better. I think I had some stuff that could cure normal injuries... Huh? It’s so full that it’s jammed?”

Iris turned the bag upside down and shook it. Out spilled all kinds of medical tools... Or, at least, things that sort of looked like them. Was that hammer with spikes on it really some kind of cure for something?

“Wait, what are those huge syringes?” I asked, eyeballing the syringes that were lying on the ground. They were as big as I was.

“Hm? Those are medical guns for treating space monsters. They can’t help being big. I mean, they are monster-sized,” Iris explained as she treated the wounds on my hand.

The needles on the guns were the size of my arm. Getting poked with one of those would be like getting stabbed.

“These medical guns use the same wormhole technology my bag does for their syringes tanks. You could fill one with as much liquid as one of Earth’s oceans. There are lots of different types, too. One’s for injuries, one’s for organs, one’s for headaches, one’s for circulation...”

“Huh...” I said, shivering.

The needle alone could kill you. If you were injected with all that liquid, your body would swell up and pop like a balloon...

“...Oh.”

Staring at the oversized needle on the medical gun, I suddenly had an idea.

The tiny fragments were connecting, one by one, with thin threads. Slowly, I concocted a way to defeat the so-called “perfect” king of beasts. Each element on its own was far too unreliable. But if I braided them all together, these fragile threads could become a spear

that was strong enough to pierce steel.

Maybe I couldn't do it by myself, but with all of us working together...! I finally had a plan to save Tsumiki, Nozomiya, Tetra, Jizu Village, and Lea, not to mention defeat Bahamut.

"Tsumiki! Do you still have that dark matter, I mean, your failed dishes?"

"Why are you assuming I failed more?! ...Well, I guess I do."

"Give them to me. I need them."

"Huh? I don't know what you're talking about. Wait, are you leaving again?"

"Sorry, I'll explain later! There's no time!"

"You said the same thing three days ago. This time, you need to explain..."

...Was she still mad that I'd left her alone? Of course she was, I guess. But right now, I seriously didn't have a second to spare.

"I'm really sorry! But I swear I won't abandon you."

I grabbed her by the hands and looked her in the eye.

"Wah! W-Wait!"

"I promise I'll be back in time for Food Champion. So please, let me go for now. Please believe in me."

"I-I still don't understand how you can say stuff like that with a straight face!"

"?"

Why was she looking away? Was I not making how I felt about her clear enough? Hmm...

As I tried to figure out how best to persuade her, Tetra stepped in from the side and put her hand on top of mine.

"Tsumiki, Rekka isn't the type of person to desert someone. Even if they aren't human, even if the enemy is incredibly powerful, he'd do everything he could to help. So I want you to believe in him, too."

"Um... Does that mean you believe in him?"

"Yes. With all my heart."

"...Fine! I get it! I mean, sure, you're not a bad guy. I'll put my faith in you one more time. But once you get back, you have to tell me what's going on!"

"Thank you. Both of you."

I bowed to Tsumiki and Tetra, and then started to get ready. I needed time for my preparations. Lea would have to hang in there just a little longer.

I really did feel like a slime forcing a heroine to buy time. But Lea... I wasn't about to let things go down like she said. I would never seal her away with Bahamut, or destroy both of them along with that fake Earth. I wasn't going to let her stay lonely forever. I was going to fight to make sure nobody had to suffer, so we could all share a happy

ending together.

I was going to save everyone.

Chapter 6: How We Fight When We're Powerless

After we finished our preparatory measures on the surface, we made for Jizu Village at top speed.

We didn't go straight through the hole because I needed something from Jizu Village for my plan to work. So while it meant taking the long route, first we were going to head underground, then make our way through the door in the Hall of Sealing.

We had one small advantage. Even if a few hours had passed here in reality, it would have only been a few minutes on the fake Earth there.

But if I wanted to save Lea, I still needed to get to Jizu Village ASAP. That much was obvious, but...

"Iris, watch out! You're scaring me! I just brushed against something! Try to be careful!" I screamed as I clung to Iris's back.

"But you're in a hurry, right, Rekka?"

"Hurry safely, please!"

"Okay, Rekka. Just hold me tighter. Then it'll be a little safer," Iris cooed in a sweet voice as she rubbed her cheek against mine.

"Aaah! Iris! Please watch where you're going while you're running!"

Tetra, the other girl with us, was in tears. She had her head buried in Iris's chest, which meant that she couldn't see what was in front of us. It made this little trip that much scarier for her.

I wished I could take her place, but... You know, as a guy, I couldn't go burying my face in Iris's chest, now could I? If I had, Satsuki and the others would have wrung my neck before we even left.

"It's fine! I've even got a light."

Iris, however, didn't sound concerned at all.

She was a Fineritan, meaning she had physical powers several times that of a human. She was carrying both me and Tetra, as well as a light she'd grabbed from her spaceship. Even so, running full tilt down the treacherous underground path didn't faze her at all.

I was glad she was there.

"'Rekka, you're hurt! I need to treat you, quick!' Why not cop a feel while she's distracted?" Like always, R had come without anybody asking her to. And, like always, she cheerfully recommended sexual

harassment. Best to ignore her.

At first I'd thought about using Satsuki's magic to fly us down to Jizu Village, but I needed her and Harissa to stay behind at Nozomiya to make sure the hole didn't get any bigger. That was crucial, too.

So the best way to get back was for Iris to carry us, but...

"Gyah! Don't just jump down!"

"But this way looks faster!"

"Aaaaah!"

I was regretting it just a little.

▽

And now I felt utterly exhausted... But we'd reached the bottom in a third of the time it had taken us before. The way down had been an adrenaline rush unlike any roller coaster. Maybe it was worth it just for that.

Iris and I rested a little in the temple while we waited for Tetra to gather the villagers. I needed their help for my plan, too.

The villagers arrived shortly, all walking in a line behind Tetra.

"This is all of them."

"Thanks, Tetra."

The room with the coffin and the statue of the goddess was filled with about fifty men and women. They were all different ages, and they all... looked kind of spaced out.

They were here because they were told to come—that was really the only reason. They were like sleepy students lining up for a morning assembly. Not that I ever listened to what the principal said at assemblies, either...

But right now, I needed their attention.

"Um... First, thank you for coming here on such short notice."

"....."

Nobody responded to my awkward greeting. I kept talking anyway.

"I think you all know this by now, but the Monster Who Defied God is thrashing around beyond the seal even as we speak. Lea... My friend is holding it back, but that won't last long."

"..."

Nobody said a word. Some of them were even so bored they were talking to the person next to them.

"If that monster escapes the seal, it will destroy this world. So please... Lend me your aid. I need your help." I bowed as low as I could.

But there was still no answer at all.

Did they not believe in me enough? Or was I just bad at explaining things? Whatever it was, this was looking grim.

Tetra had said that whatever was put into the coffin would grow in number endlessly, but the speed at which it grew depended on the number of people praying. And only the people of Jizu Village could use it, which meant that without their help, it was going to take a lot longer to get what I needed to defeat Bahamut.

Just when I opened my mouth to say something else, Tetra stepped forward.

"Tetra?"

"Please leave this to me, Rekka," she said. Her face tensed up as she turned to the crowd. "Everyone, listen. As of today, we will be relieved of our role as guardians. That means that we will no longer be able to use the miracles of God."

For the first time, the people began to respond.

She probably meant the mysterious light that illuminated the village, and the coffin that made things multiply infinitely... Without those, Jizu Village was probably doomed.

"How do you know that?!" screamed one of the villagers.

"It's what I've learned from piecing together the legends."

"That's a lie!"

"It's not a lie."

The villagers were starting to get riled up, but Tetra answered calmly.

"Has anyone here read the old scrolls and books, or investigated the legends more than I have?" That shut them all up. "What I'm telling you is the truth. Today, Rekka is going to defeat the Monster Who Defied God, and we will complete our task as guardians... From now on, we need to find a new way for all of us to live."

The hall fell silent.

I could tell that everyone was uncertain of how to react to what they just heard. They'd spent their whole lives relying on God's miracles, and to suddenly have to survive without them... If I were in their shoes, I probably wouldn't know what to say, either.

"...Then maybe he shouldn't defeat the monster, right?" Someone whispered.

It might have been what was going through all of their minds, but...

"Shut up!"

Tetra shot the idea down immediately.

“If the Monster comes through that door, our village and the surface will both be destroyed! Weren’t you listening? If you were and you said that anyway, you really are terrible!”

Her raised voice reverberated throughout the room.

“Don’t you all hate this? Does it not bother you to live down here where there’s no pain and no joy? God has decided everything for us until now! Today is our chance to choose!” Her voice was strong as she spoke. “Whatever trouble may befall us, however lazy we’ve become after tens of millions of years... If we work together, we can overcome it. So stand up and fight! Fight the Monster! Fight yourself!”

She spoke from her heart—the heart of a girl who’d always wanted to do something to help the village.

“...What do you want us to do, Tetra?”

They were words only she could have said, and the only words that could move the hearts of the people.

“Thank you, everyone.” Tetra bowed and then turned to me. “Rekka.”

“Yeah.” I nodded and took out the bag that Tsumiki had given me. It was filled with dark matter. “First, I want you to make more of these. And then...”

As I explained the outline of the plan to the villagers, I whispered “thank you” to Tetra. It was because of her that I would have everything I needed to fight.

The rest was up to me.

▽

The three of us were standing in the fake temple on the fake Earth. It was the second time for me and Tetra, and the first time for Iris.

“Okay, make SURE you stay hidden. Got it?”

“Got it.”

I insisted again, after already having done so many times, and Tetra nodded. It was the response I wanted, but still, I was worried about her. She hadn’t gotten any real rest for over a day now. Yet that hadn’t stopped her from coming back to the artificial world to witness the conclusion to her story.

“I’d still feel better if you waited in Jizu Village.”

“I’m sorry for causing you trouble. But I want to see this through.”

Tetra was staggering a little, but she wasn’t going to change her mind. I sighed in resignation... just in time to hear a booming noise outside the temple.

“Iris, let’s go!”

“Right, Rekka!”

We started to run.

What we saw when we went outside was truly a sight to behold—a battle that was destroying the world.

Lea in the form of a giant snake, “The Strongest Beast.”

And Bahamut the massive elephant, “The Perfect Beast.”

Each time the two of them collided, the fake Earth howled.

Saying “the world was about to break” was an understatement. Flames, waterspouts, whirlwinds, earthquakes... Pandemonium stretched out before me. And this was all just the aftershock of the two beasts fighting! The sealed world that God had created was already in tatters.

It was clear just from watching it that a normal human like me had no business getting involved at all. And yet here I was.

“Lea...!”

How many minutes had passed here while we were gone? I didn’t know for sure. But she was already a mess. Her wings were torn. Half of one horn was missing. Covered in cuts and bruises, she was bleeding everywhere.

“Tch...!”

I could’ve used the warp watch to get us to Lea instantly, but... it took ten seconds to activate after inputting the coordinates. If Lea moved during that time, we’d be heading straight for the ground.

Instead, I had just the tool!

“Iris, do it!”

“Leave it to me!”

Iris stuck her hand into her bag... and pulled out a flight unit that sat two people. It was originally a vehicle intended for making repairs to the outside of her spaceship, she’d said.

It was hard to keep my balance on it, and all I could do was make it float and climb. That’s why I had Iris pilot it.

“Sorry. I shouldn’t be asking you to do something so dangerous.”

“Don’t worry about it. This time, I was barely able to be with you at all. I’m happy I got to be useful.”

“Glad to hear it.”

“Okay, here we go!”

“Right!”

I got on the back of the small craft, which looked like a motorcycle with no tires, and wrapped my arms around Iris’s waist. It silently rose up, then suddenly and forcefully accelerated.

This wasn’t going to be an easy ride. Our path was filled with the whirlwinds, fires, spears of water, and dust storms they were kicking up. There was no end to the forces trying to block our way.

“A-Are you okay? Iris?!”

“I-I’m fine! I can do this! But it’s gonna get rough, so hold on

tighter...”

“Wah! Look in front of you! In front!”

Were we really going to be okay?! There went another fireball, right in front of us! I screamed when I saw that it was big enough to swallow us both, but...

“Upsy-daisy!” Iris whistled a little as she dodged it.

I was really impressed. No joking.

“Iris, are you a good driver?”

“I used to be a big tomboy. I would go wherever I wanted in my spaceship, and sometimes I’d go adventuring on dangerous planets. So fireballs and stuff are no big deal.”

If you asked me, she was still a tomboy... but I really was glad to have her along. After that, Iris kept artfully dodging obstacles until we arrived at our destination.

“Here, Rekka. If you speak through this, it’ll make your voice louder.”

“Thanks. Wait, this is really small.”

She had handed me a microphone the size of my fingertip. From Lea’s perspective, we were like fleas right now. Without this, we wouldn’t even be able to talk to her.

“Lea! It’s me! Look over here!”

I held the tiny microphone between my fingers and shouted in her direction. Just then, one of Bahamut’s explosion spells struck her square in the chest.

“Gyaaah!”

“Lea!”

Her huge snake body twisted in the air and fell to the ground. We quickly followed after her.

“GUGYAOOOH!” Bahamut gave a roar that threatened to burst my eardrums.

I couldn’t tell if it was joy that he’d shot down Lea, or whether he’d just gone insane. After all, even when I looked up, only his bottom half fit in my field of vision.

Bahamut had grown even more massive than before. Lea was big, but he was several times bigger. A single step from him would be enough to squash a small mountain or two flat.

From Bahamut’s perspective, I wasn’t even an ant. I was more like a speck of dust.

This was Bahamut, the Perfect Beast. The king of beasts who had once been greater than all the creatures of the earth.

I was sure that not even the armies of the world working together would have stood a chance against him. If there was anything that could, it was...

“Lea!”

It had to be her.

"...Rekka."

The wounded snake turned its gaze on us.

"Why did you come back? I..."

"We came to save you!" I cut her off as I snatched Iris's bag out of her hands.

Leviathan was the Strongest Beast, the ruler of the seas. The second king of beasts whose power had once rivaled Bahamut's.

Even Bahamut had feared her might. So why was she losing so badly now? The answer was obvious: there wasn't any food here in this world. She'd simply run out of fuel.

And that meant all we had to do was help her recover!

"We'll talk later! For now, just look up and open your mouth!"

Lea was visibly confused, but did so anyway. I opened the bag and dumped out what was inside—the dark matter that had been multiplied in the temple coffin.

A black waterfall poured from the bag straight into her mouth. It just kept going and going. I'd figured it was best to have as many as possible, so I'd brought as much as I could.

And then Bahamut howled.

It seemed he'd noticed us. He'd responded to the dark matter last time, so maybe that was what did it.

"CQGQQQQQGYYYYY!"

Bahamut raised one of his colossal legs. The shadow cast by a single one of his thick claws turned the area around us from day to night.

Was he going to step on us?! I didn't even need to ask. That was clearly his intention.

A gigantic leg came thundering down towards us. As the terror of death overwhelmed me, I reflexively shielded Iris. And then there was a roar like two meteors colliding.

I thought that Bahamut's attack had shattered the ground. But it looked like Iris and I were still alive.

"...Huh?"

I opened my eyes, afraid.

It was then that I realized the huge white snake had coiled itself around us. Lea had protected us from Bahamut's attack.

"Are you two okay?"

I could hear Lea's voice in my head.

"Lea! How are you talking to us?"

"Now that I've got my power back, telepathy is easy for me."

"Huh? Wow, this is amazing!"

"This is Tetra... I can hear you guys, too!"

I heard Iris's and Tetra's voices after Lea's. Her telepathy must

have connected everyone else's mind with my own.

"If you have your power back, does that mean you're okay now?"

"I meant to save you, but instead you saved me again, huh? ...But yes, it's okay now."

She pushed back against Bahamut's leg with all her might. The huge elephant staggered backward and the earth screamed.

"Get on my head. If you're flying around, you might get caught up in the battle."

"Okay! Rekka, let's go!"

The flight unit started to climb again. Once we reached the right altitude, we landed on Lea's head and stowed the flight unit back in Iris's bag.

She'd regained her power as the Strongest Beast. Just as the legends said, her body had grown even larger than Bahamut's. She was big enough to swallow a sea in a single gulp. Her broken horns and her ruined wings had regenerated, and her wounds were healed. There was no trace of the damage she'd suffered earlier.

"I'm glad we made it in time..."

I was so relieved that I almost let my guard down.

When Lea had left us, she truly intended to die. I'd never had to walk away from someone who was willing to do that before. It honestly scared me. And I was really glad I was able to save her.

But her story wasn't over yet.

"GUFRYOOOOOAAA!"

Bahamut roared, and thousands of flames appeared around him. They all formed into spears the size of skyscrapers, and every last one of them was hurled... in our direction. The fiery bombardment raced straight for us.

But...

"I'm not who I was a moment ago."

The bolts of flame, which were each big enough to turn a metropolis into a conflagration, were shot down by equally large spears of water that extinguished them.

"Both of you, hang on!" Lea called to us telepathically as she flew high up into the sky.

Bahamut was slow and earthbound. In contrast, Lea's winding body lashed back and forth in mid-air as she attacked. She slashed at Bahamut's back with whips made of water, like dozens of Amazon Rivers wound together.

His towering, mountainous body shook from the impact. Bahamut wailed in rage and attacked back with more roaring flames. Lea used a shield of water to block them as she dove towards her foe.

"R-R-R-R-Rekka, a-are w-w-we okay?"

"W-W-We... We... We're f-f-fine! D-D-Don't f-fall, Iris!"

“Are you two all right?”

I sent a quick telepathic “we’re good” message back to Tetra.

Iris and I clung tightly to Lea as we watched the clash between the rulers of the beasts. The battle was basically even—but Lea was the more aggressive one. I guess it was partly because magic water was stronger than magic fire or something, but it also seemed that as the Strongest Beast, she was better at attacking than Bahamut was.

But…

“D-Does it look like it’s working?”

“…No.”

Lea had landed direct hit after direct hit on Bahamut, but he wasn’t hurt at all.

“I thought that my attacks weren’t working before because I was still in a weakened state… but maybe this is just the nature of the Perfect Beast.” Lea sounded troubled as she spoke directly into my head.

Perfect: unharmed and whole. If you looked it up in a dictionary, you’d probably see something like that. So did that mean while Lea had stronger offensive capabilities, Bahamut had perfected defenses?

The artificial world was reaching its very real limits.

If Lea and Bahamut didn’t finish their fight, there would be nothing to stop it from spilling out into the outside world. The mole people, the humans on the surface, nature itself—everything would be destroyed. I wouldn’t let that happen!

Our enemy was capable of surviving even Lea’s attacks unscathed. But he didn’t have defensive wards like Messiah, or the ability to neutralize magic like the Demon King. He was taking Lea’s darts of water head-on; they just weren’t harming him.

I’d borrowed the laser gun from Iris, just in case, but there probably wasn’t even a point in trying. All I had left was my trump card.

“Lea, I need a favor. Can you stop him from moving?”

“I think so, but why?”

“I have a plan. If you can pin him down, I’ll jump on his body.”

“That’s dangerous.”

“Of course it is. Now do it.”

“…Why are you doing all this, Rekka?”

“Huh?” I didn’t realize what she was asking at first.

“Rekka, you humans are quite frail, aren’t you? You don’t have mighty bodies like mine. So why are you willing to do all this?”

“Why else?” I didn’t know if she’d be able to tell via telepathy, but I smiled at Lea. “It doesn’t matter whether you’re weak or strong when it comes to protecting what you care about.”

▽

“Hang on tight!”

Lea flew through the sky like a shooting star, leaving a trail of light behind her. She went back and forth from skillfully evading Bahamut’s fireballs to knocking them out of the sky as she closed in on her target.

“Gnnuuh!”

I braved the wall of wind pressing into me as I waited for her to get close enough to Bahamut. And at last, they were close enough for their fangs to reach each other.

“Ggyaaah!”

Lea dodged an attack from the tusks of the raging elephant. Then she slid beneath Bahamut and wrapped herself around him, effectively locking him in place.

“Rekka!”

“Right!”

I stood up and ran across Lea’s head. The top of her head alone was bigger than the track and field area at school. I was completely out of breath by the time I arrived at the edge.

“Doryaaah!”

I slid down it, then jumped the remaining distance to land on Bahamut’s forehead. Next, I retrieved Iris’s space-age medical gun from her bag that I borrowed.

It wasn’t just the dark matter that I’d multiplied in the temple coffin. I’d had all the villagers donate a little blood, and then multiplied that, too.

That’s right. This oversized syringe was filled with the blood of the guardians—Bahamut’s one weakness. All I had to do was inject him, and it would be over!

I wrapped my arms around the medical gun, which was almost as big as I was, and used both arms to pull the trigger... But the needle snapped when it hit Bahamut’s tough hide.

“What?!” I screamed in shock at how naïve I’d been.

I’d assumed that even if Lea couldn’t beat Bahamut, the blood of the guardians would still be enough. But hadn’t we just witnessed his ultimate defenses firsthand? Even if it was the latest in space technology, a tiny little needle wasn’t going to cut it.

I’d screwed up. Big time.

And then Bahamut’s gargantuan trunk came flying at me from the side.

“Aaah!”

From my perspective, it was like a wall rushing at me at high speed. There was nothing I could do as it smacked me into the air and

I fell toward the earth.

"Rekka?!" I could hear the girls scream.

But I couldn't answer. Not only was the damage nearly enough to rip my body to pieces, but I was falling from the equivalent of Earth's stratosphere.

"……!"

It's hard to describe the terror of skydiving without a parachute. The pressure alone keeps you from screaming.

I did my best to stop the pain and fear from shutting down my mind.

Something kept hitting my back, and it hurt. I looked to see what it was, and saw Iris's bag slamming into my back as it flailed in the rushing wind… Of course! I carefully pulled it closer so that the wind wouldn't blow it away.

The surface had seemed so far away, but now it was close enough that I could see the fake temple.

Hurry, hurry, hurry! Each time I tried to undo the fastener on the bag, the wind pushed it back into place. It was starting to piss me off. The lost time and the quickly approaching ground were bad enough, but my biggest fear was that the wind would rip the bag out of my hands. But carefully… carefully…

I passed by Bahamut's knees. How much longer before I hit the ground?

Finally, I was able to open the bag. I reached my hand into the wormhole inside. The ground was almost—

"Found it!"

I pulled the flight unit out of the bag. From there I tried gunning the throttle, pulling the levers, and kicking the pedals—whatever I could think of to get it to start.

I was still falling. I couldn't see anything but dirt. I kicked even harder on the pedal, fighting the urge to cry.

Suddenly there was the unmistakable sound of the engine sucking in air, and the flight unit fought back against gravity to stop my descent.

"Uwah-wah!"

The recoil yanked my hands from the grips and threw my body upward.

"Gweh!"

My back slammed hard against the ground, forcing the air from my lungs.

But I was alive.

"Hahh… Hahh… Hahh…"

Call me a coward if you want. I'm never going bungee jumping.

I looked around, and the flight unit was right next to me. I tried it

again. Thankfully it still worked.

My whole body hurt. I felt something slick running down my face. I licked the corner of my mouth and tasted blood. I must've split open my cheek.

"Rekka? Rekka?! Are you alive?" I could hear Iris crying. The telepathy was still working, too.

"I'm okay... somehow. What about you?"

"Lea's grappling him so he can't crush you. Can you come back up here?"

"..."

I could use the flight unit to regain the elevation, but after that I'd have to risk my life jumping onto Lea's body. That didn't bother me.

The problem was that once I'd gotten back up there, nothing would be solved.

"Gufwah fwah fwah!" Suddenly, unpleasant laughter echoed in my head.

I knew it.

"Bahamut? How—"

"Telepathy is a simple skill for a king of beasts, as you know. It's child's play for me to intrude on your conversation. Gwahaha!" Bahamut answered Lea's angry question with a laugh.

"Didn't you go insane?" This time it was my turn to speak.

"Gyah hyah hyah hyah! Where'd you get that dumb ideaaaaa? If I totally lose my miiiind, how can I enjoy the thrill of destroying thingsssss?"

"That's insane enough as it is!"

"Hah! Probably from a human perspective, yesssss." Bahamut laughed. "Rekka Namidare, I know what you're affffffter! You're trying to get that Tetra girl's blood inside my bodyyyyy!"

"I don't know what you're talking about!"

"You little insects don't have any other hooooope! But you caaaaan't pierce my skinnnn! Keep it up, and I'll step on yooooouuu!"

Damn it. He'd guessed my plan.

"I won't let that happen," Lea growled at Bahamut.

"Feh! Gwahahaha!" But he just laughed again. "Why do you think I'm wasting time talking about this?"

"—?!"

A dreadful chill shot up my spine as I finally realized what was around me. It was warm and bright—but we were supposed to be in the artificial world where there was only a dim light. I looked up to the sky.

There was a fireball above us so big it blocked out the whole sky.

"This is my ultimate spell, 'Celestial Sphere of Inferno.' What do you think, Leviathan? While you slept away all these millennia, I'm

now perfect—and the strongest!"

"What?!"

I could sense Lea's panic in her thoughts. Enough to know she couldn't defend against this spell.

"It's almost ready. It's going to incinerate everything inside the seal, so there's nowhere to run! Gwahahaha!"

"GUHYAAAAAOOOU!"

His mocking telepathic messages overlapped with the roar he let out as the crimson sun grew even brighter. It was like the burning sky was falling to the earth...

And with Bahamut's perfect defenses, he'd probably walk away no worse for wear.

So what about us?!

"Tetra, run into the back of the temple!"

It was all I could do to scream telepathically. There was just no hope. Even if we could protect ourselves somehow, the seal wouldn't withstand something like that. We wouldn't be able to protect the world outside.

For a moment, utter despair sank into me.

But...

"Wait! Lea?!" Iris yelled as Lea started to move.

I saw a blue sphere fly from Lea's head. It was a thin capsule made of water, and I could see Iris inside of it.

After sending Iris to safety, Lea let out a roar that shook heaven and earth.

And all the seas of the artificial world answered her call. Hundreds of torrents rose up from the seas and flew toward the Celestial Sphere of Inferno. They were enough to slow it down, but they couldn't stop it.

The Celestial Sphere was going to fall.

"Giyaaah!" Lea roared again.

She threw herself before the spell, using her body to shield the seal. Her screaming threatened to rip apart the already unstable world as it filled with the smell of burning flesh.

"Lea!" I knew she couldn't hear me, but still I screamed her name at the top of my lungs. And then...

"Don't... give up..." I heard her voice telepathically. "You showed me the way, Rekka. If we all work together..." Her words resounded in my heart.

The one thing I couldn't do was stop thinking. That was the same as giving up!

My only weapon was a single medical gun filled with the blood of the guardians. If I could get that blood into Bahamut's body, it would kill him like a poison. But the medical gun was already half-broken

after I tried to stab it into his impenetrable skin. One more failure and it would be useless.

The biggest problem was his perfect defense. Lea's attacks hadn't so much as scratched him. The Hero's Sword and the laser gun wouldn't help either.

"Damn it! Isn't there something...?"

I racked my brain, but there was no way to hurt him. Especially not with some syringe needle... Wait a second.

I had already seen how to hurt him. The guardians' blood had burned away his flesh.

"...That's right."

Bahamut was the king of beasts, created by God to be perfect. Nothing of this world could hurt him. It would take something else created by God's hand. That's why Bahamut's bane was the blood of the guardians.

Not only that, but God himself had struck down Bahamut millions of years ago.

"There's a spot on Bahamut's back where God's spear pierced his hide, and it's still bleeding." That's what Satsuki had said.

The light bulb came on. If I could get to that wound, I could inject him with the blood of the guardians, even with a broken needle!

I grabbed the flight unit off the ground and gunned the engine. As long as I could keep my balance, I could use it to go upwards. Iris was still in mid-air, protected by Lea's magic. This part was on me.

I looked up at Bahamut's hulking body. I'd just have to use the craft to ascend right beside him and jump off when I reached his back. I'd only get one chance.

But Lea had suffered so much to give me this chance! I couldn't let it go to waste! I threw open the throttle on the flight unit and took off. I almost toppled over several times, but desperation kept me clinging to the vehicle as it climbed higher and higher.

Before long, Bahamut's back stretched out as far as the eye could see. I leaned off the flight unit... and then jumped.

"Guuuh!"

Somehow I managed to grab on with both arms and legs. I almost slipped right off, but his rough skin acted like footholds.

"Lea! Just wait a second! I've got this!" I yelled to her telepathically.

She must've been too busy to answer. There was no reply. Instead...

"Hmm? Rekka Namidare? What are you trying to do?"

Bahamut heard me.

"I couldn't tell you!"

I mostly ignored him and started to run. He'd already found me

out. He'd quickly realized that my target was the wound on his back.

So I ran as fast as my legs would carry me.

I could guess about where it would be. While he was in his super-deformed "Bah" form, there was a bandage on his back. I still remembered where it had been.

Smack in the middle of his back. That was where I was going.

"You—you bastard! You can't...!"

Bahamut was onto me. I continued to ignore him and tried to run faster.

"Ha! I found you!"

I could see it out of the corner of my eye. Geysers of blood were shooting out of a gaping stab wound here and there. Just like Satsuki had learned from the Magic of Omniscience, the wound God had inflicted on him still hadn't healed.

"Tch! Fine, I'll shake you off!"

I quickly dropped down and held on to his coarse skin again. A few moments later, an incredible shockwave raced through my body as he flung himself back and forth. I dug my nails in and held on for everything I was worth.

"Fall off! Fall off, you stupid insect!"

"Hah! Yeah, I bet I am just a flea to you, but..." Not even an elephant can shake off a flea!

From my perspective, Bahamut's back was so vast that it was almost like being on the ground. Unless he hit me with his trunk like he did before, it would be harder for me to fall off than stay on. And there was no way his trunk could reach me here.

But still, it wasn't easy to run across the shaking ground, so I had to crawl to my destination.

"Damn it! Damn it! I am Bahamut, the Perfect Beast! You humans are tiny and helpless! You only exist to give me something to step onnnnn!"

"...Yeah, that's right. You're perfect." Maybe Bahamut really was a creature without any flaws, complete unto itself. "That's why you don't need other people."

He didn't need anyone. He was perfect on his own. That was the reason he'd be able to destroy everything without hesitation.

"Everyone probably looks weak to you. Humans, animals, plants, even Lea who's supposed to be the strongest creature of them all. They all look weak. But..."

Crawling on my belly along his hard, rock-like skin had ripped open my uniform, and my chest was already covered with blood. It was starting to sting pretty bad.

But I kept going anyway. Because...

"...Since we're weak, we hold on to each other. We work together.

Alone, we could never beat a perfect being like you. And that's why..."

Without the blood of Tetra and the other guardians, I never would've had a way to defeat Bahamut. Without Lea's sacrifice, I never would've been able to confront him. And without Tsumiki's help, Lea never would've gotten her power back. Iris, Satsuki, and Harissa, too... Without them, I would've died a long time ago.

I certainly wouldn't have made it here, Bahamut's open wound, on my own. I took the medical gun out of the bag again.

"Noooooo!"

Spindles of flame burst from the Celestial Sphere by the hundreds and spiraled towards me.

But I didn't care. There was nothing I could do to stop them anyway. And that's why...

"Rekka!"

Lea would protect me with her walls of water.

I felt bad for making her work even harder, but instead of apologizing, I would do what I had to do.

"We weak creatures will work together and defeat you, the 'perfect' beast."

I jammed the medical gun into one of the blood vessels I could see exposed in the wound, and pulled the trigger.

The ocean's worth of guardian blood in the syringe—a fatal poison to Bahamut—immediately began circulating through his body.

"GYAAAOOOOOOOO!" Bahamut's yowling cries echoed throughout the fake Earth.

Damn... It was really loud...

I supported myself with the medical gun to keep from falling over. Eventually, the beast's screams went silent. And that was the end of the "Monster Who Defied God."

Epilogue

Several days after defeating the beast from the age of gods, during lunchtime at school...

“Hmm?”

“Oh, there you are.” Tsumiki came up to me as I was walking down the hall. She seemed like she had been looking for me. She was holding a boxed lunch, carefully wrapped in a cloth napkin...

RUN!

“Why are you running away?!”

“Humans should never give up hope for survival!”

“What does that even mean?! You’re talking to the winner of Food Champion, you know.”

Tsumiki angrily punched me in the head... repeatedly. Punched, not slapped, mind you. It really hurt.

“S-Stop it!”

As I tried to protect my head, I remembered what had happened over the last few days...

▽

After Bahamut’s screams had echoed their last through the artificial world, the Celestial Sphere of Inferno disappeared.

At the same time, his body started to crumble like a sandcastle. Which meant, of course, that what I was standing on dissolved from underneath me...

“Ugyaaaah!”

I ended up plummeting to the ground below before I could even enjoy my victory. And without a flight unit this time! I was going to die!

But the feeling of falling suddenly faded away. I looked around and saw that I was inside the same kind of bubble Lea had used on Iris.

“You defeated the king of beasts. Don’t die in such a stupid way.”

“Yeah... You really saved me.”

Lea used her magic to land me safely. I wanted to take a break right then and there, but there was more work to be done.

“Lea, I need a favor.”

“What is it?”

“You said you’d be willing to give some of your meat to Tsumiki,

right? Can you do that?"

"Of course."

Something small came flying off the forehead of the giant sea snake. I looked up to realize that it was her core—the girl Lea.

She slowly descended and landed next to us.

"Whew... That was heavy."

"It was heavy?"

"Yeah. Look how big it is," Lea said as she patted her own (?) huge body.

"Um... So can I take that?"

"Yes. It's an empty shell now, so do with it what you will. It cost me most of my power, but it's worth it for you and Tsumiki." Lea stared at me as she spoke—and then suddenly grabbed me.

"Huh? Wha—?"

Iris had been hugging me a lot lately, but still, I was a healthy high school boy, and having an older girl pressing her body up against me was... Um, it was a new experience. And, um... My head was getting all hot and fuzzy.

"Rekka, thank you."

"No, I didn't really do anything..."

"Don't be so humble. You saved my lonely soul." Lea pulled away a little and looked straight at me. I could see myself, looking a little unsure of what to say, reflected in her purple eyes. "I love the children of man. I'm grateful to Tsumiki. But Rekka... You're even more special."

"Um..." Her words were so straightforward and from the heart that I didn't know how to respond.

"Go for it, Rekka. She's yours."

R, just shut up! And go for what, exactly?!

As I kept fidgeting uneasily...

"Rekka! What are you two doing?"

My savior—that is, Iris—appeared next to me.

"No cheating!"

"Fgwah!"

And she hit me hard. Iris was so strong that I flew at least a good ten meters.

"Th-That was harder than usual..." I flailed my limbs about like a dying insect.

"You don't think it's because Lea's breasts are bigger than hers?"

R, you really don't look at anything but boobs, do you?

Well, thanks to the punch, I was out of the sticky situation I'd found myself in.

"All right... Let's take this meat back." It was intended to be an offering to God, so even if it was just sliced up for yakiniku, it could

probably win Food Champion, but... “But Tsumiki can turn even meat into dark matter just by cooking it...”

“If that happens, I’ll eat it,” Lea said.

It may or may not have been a good idea to begin with, but right now, if Tsumiki couldn’t cook something reasonable, this whole thing was pointless.

“Maybe I could help. I’m pretty sure I can make yakiniku...”

“Rekka, I have an idea, actually...” Tetra raised her hand. “Actually, it’s less of a suggestion and more me asking for a favor...”

“...?”

And so Tetra explained her idea...

▽

Tetra and Tsumiki entered Food Champion together and won first place. Of course, Tetra did the cooking. Tsumiki’s job was to be nice and friendly to the judges.

If there’s something you can’t do yourself, you should ask someone who can. It’s important to have the right person for the right job.

“Hey! Come on, eat my lunch!”

“No, Tsumiki... The right person for the right job means that you shouldn’t be doing the cooking...”

“Shut up and eat it!”

“Mguh!” My pleas, however, fell on deaf ears as Tsumiki jammed the rice ball down my throat and forced my jaw closed. “Ugguguguh... hmm? It doesn’t hurt.”

There was no headache, no stomach pain, and no mysterious, severe agony.

It was real food. I was shocked. I was shocked that I was shocked, but I was still shocked.

“Wait... This is actually good.”

“W-Well, I did have Tetra help a little.”

“Oh yeah? How much is a little?”

“I had her make the rice, then put the filling in and make it into a ball, and then shape it into a triangle for me.”

...That was the whole thing. All that was left was to wrap the seaweed around it.

But it was because of that that I was still alive, so I figured I needed to thank Tetra for it.

“A-Ahem.” Tsumiki coughed, a little deliberately. “So yeah, I’m learning how to cook, little by little.”

“Yeah, hang in there.”

I gave what I thought was a pretty plain response, but for some reason Tsumiki’s cheeks went red.

“S-So I was hoping you could be my taste tester...” And she said something that terrified me.

“Huh? I... I think Lea, the girl I introduced you to, would gladly be your taste tester...”

“I want it to be you!”

I tried to change the subject, but for some reason it only made Tsumiki even redder.

“O-Oh... I see...”

Why was she so insistent on sending me to hell? I didn’t understand what she wanted. What was wrong with Lea? She’d gladly eat Tsumiki’s dark matter!

“So you’d better come to Nozomiya today, got it? I’ve got a special menu just for you!”

“What...?”

“Y-You’d better! If you don’t, I’ll never forgive you!” Tsumiki ran off before I could stop her.

I felt strange for a while, like I was somehow cut off and isolated from the hustle and bustle in the hallway around me. More specifically, I felt like a prisoner who was just about to be sent to the execution chamber.

“Well, it does make me happy that even after I told her about my bloodline, she still treats me normally, but...”

After we got back to the surface, I told Tsumiki everything—about the stories I’d been caught up in this time, and about the bloodline of the Namidare—just like I’d promised.

At first, I was afraid she would think I was weird, or worse, creepy. But in fact, she’d just been acting like this. Part of me was grateful, but most of me wanted nothing to do with this “special menu” of hers.

“...Maybe I’ll have Satsuki put protection magic on beforehand like last time.”

“She’ll probably refuse, though.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re dense.”

“?” R never made any sense. Satsuki wouldn’t refuse without a good reason...

▽

Or so I thought. When I told her I was going to eat Tsumiki’s cooking, she’d looked at me with terribly cold eyes and simply gone home alone. Iris also told me not to go, but then she put me in a sleeper hold.

I mean, I wasn’t really excited about the idea either... But if I ignored her and hurt her feelings, I’d feel bad, too. So I went to

Nozomiya after school regardless.

But I did almost die.

“Huh? That’s strange... I was sure if I cooked it, it would be fine...”

“It tasted like Nirvana...” I mean, I’d never been to Nirvana, but basically it was a taste beyond imagination.

“Okay, I’ll bring the next dish.”

“The next one?!” Don’t tell me it’s a full course thing!

Tsumiki ignored my visible shuddering and went back into the kitchen.

“Looks like you’re having a rough day.”

Lea, wearing a t-shirt, sat down next to me. She’d lost most of her power and was now living in human society, doing whatever she pleased. But she still came to Nozomiya quite often. Without her there to secretly eat the food Tsumiki made for me, I might really have gone on a one-way trip to the next world.

“Man, I don’t even think I care anymore...”

Tetra, in her Nozomiya apron, brought me water as I laid my face on the table.

“Are you all right, Rekka?”

“Yeah, I think so. Anyway, you get used to your new job, Tetra?”

“Yes, thanks to you.”

After her victory at Food Champion, she’d been working part-time at Nozomiya.

“I want to learn more about surface culture so I can help Jizu Village grow,” she’d said.

Speaking of Jizu Village...

“So how are they liking the artificial world?”

“It’s going well. After the seal was destroyed, it ceased working like a prison for the Monster, I guess. The flow of time is almost the same as it is in the real world now, so if we sow seeds, they’ll grow. Everyone will finish moving soon.”

“I see.”

The villagers were all moving to the formerly sealed world. That part was my idea. I’d hoped that a new place to live might bring some life back into them. But more than that, I knew that living in that cramped underground cave meant there was no way for the village to grow. It even restricted how many people could live there. It just wasn’t a good place to be.

There was no way to revive the village in a stifled place like that, so I suggested a change of venue. Of course, I thought there might be a possibility Tetra was so attached to the village itself that I would need to come up with another way to save her story, but she had agreed.

What she wanted to save, she said, wasn't the village. It was the people. And so now they were in the process of moving. To sort out the best way to go about handling the move, Tetra was here to learn all she could about the way humans lived. Several other villagers had also come to the surface with her and were working elsewhere nearby. Nozomiya's rise to fame had brought some life back to the sleepy shopping street, too, so most places were hiring.

There was still much to be done, but as long as they were all willing to work together to make things better, Jizu Village was going to be fine.

"Are the guardians eating my meat?" Lea joined in the conversation.

"Yes. They're very grateful."

"I see. Tell them they can have as much of it as they want to keep them fed until the first harvests come in."

"Thank you." Tetra bowed to Lea.

"Wait, isn't it going to rot?" I asked.

"It was supposed to be an offering to God. It's meant to last the ages. More importantly, Rekka, it's rude to suggest that I would just 'rot.'"

"W-Wait! I'm sorry!"

Lea put me in chokehold. The soft feeling on the back of my head was incredible... But my train of thought was interrupted by the whooshing sound of a tray flying between us.

"T-Tetra...?"

"No flirting allowed in the restaurant, sir!"

"Have you picked up some weird vocabulary since you started working on the surface?"

"It's not allowed, sir."

"...Okay."

For some reason, Tetra looked really scary. What on earth was going on? Lea looked at me and chuckled.

"You have a rough time with girls, don't you?"

It wasn't funny.

"I feel like someone stole my line," R chimed in.

She wasn't making any sense, either.

Then Tsumiki emerged from the kitchen holding a tray.

"Okay, this time, I know it's going to be good!" She covered the table with plates, all loaded with strangely shaped black objects.

Sheesh... It was one thing to put my life at risk for a story. But why was my life still in danger after her story was over? And what was worse, I had even more heroines now. R had said that I would save hundreds of heroines in the future. Maybe she wasn't joking. Maybe this really would turn into a war.

Even so, that didn't mean I was capable of choosing any of them yet. These days, I hated myself for being so indecisive.

But this was something important enough that I couldn't just choose lightly. It would be rude to all of them.

Still... the longer I put it off, the more complicated things were going to get. Ugh...

This bloodline was a real problem sometimes. Seriously.

"But you know..."

I didn't know who it was that I liked yet. Maybe that was okay for now... But someday, I would decide. That was one quiet vow I'd made for myself.

I had to protect the future where R came from, for one thing.

"...?" R looked at me expressionlessly, tilting her head to the side.

It wasn't something I had to tell her, and I wasn't going to. But more importantly...

"Hey! Come on, Rekka, eat the food!"

I needed to escape the peril that had already befallen me. Before I saved the future, I needed to make sure I had a future of my own.

Gwah.

のぞみ屋
今日のおすすめ
お茶漬け
100円
お新香
たまご焼
のぞみ屋

Prologue 2

After I said goodbye to Tsumiki, R and I headed home. I was still clutching my stomach.

“Halfway through, Tetra started cooking things for me, too... Why?”

“It’s because you’re obtuse and slow, et cetera, et cetera.”

She’d just started saying “et cetera.” Was it that obvious?

I still couldn’t figure it out...

“Hmm?”

I saw someone standing with their arms crossed in front of my house. It was too tall to be Harissa... and her hair was different than Satsuki’s or Iris’s. I’d just left everybody else at Nozomiya... So who was it?

“Are you Rekka Namidare?”

It was a girl I’d never seen before.

“Yeah, I am. Who are you?”

“My name is Hibiki Banjo,” the girl—Hibiki—said in a clear voice. “Rekka Namidare, you need to marry me.”

“...Huh?”

Those were the first words out of her mouth.

—Fin—

Afterword

This is the second volume of my all-worlds (including space and other dimensions) fantasy series. Hello again to people who bought the first volume. And it's nice to meet all you folks who bought both of them at once.

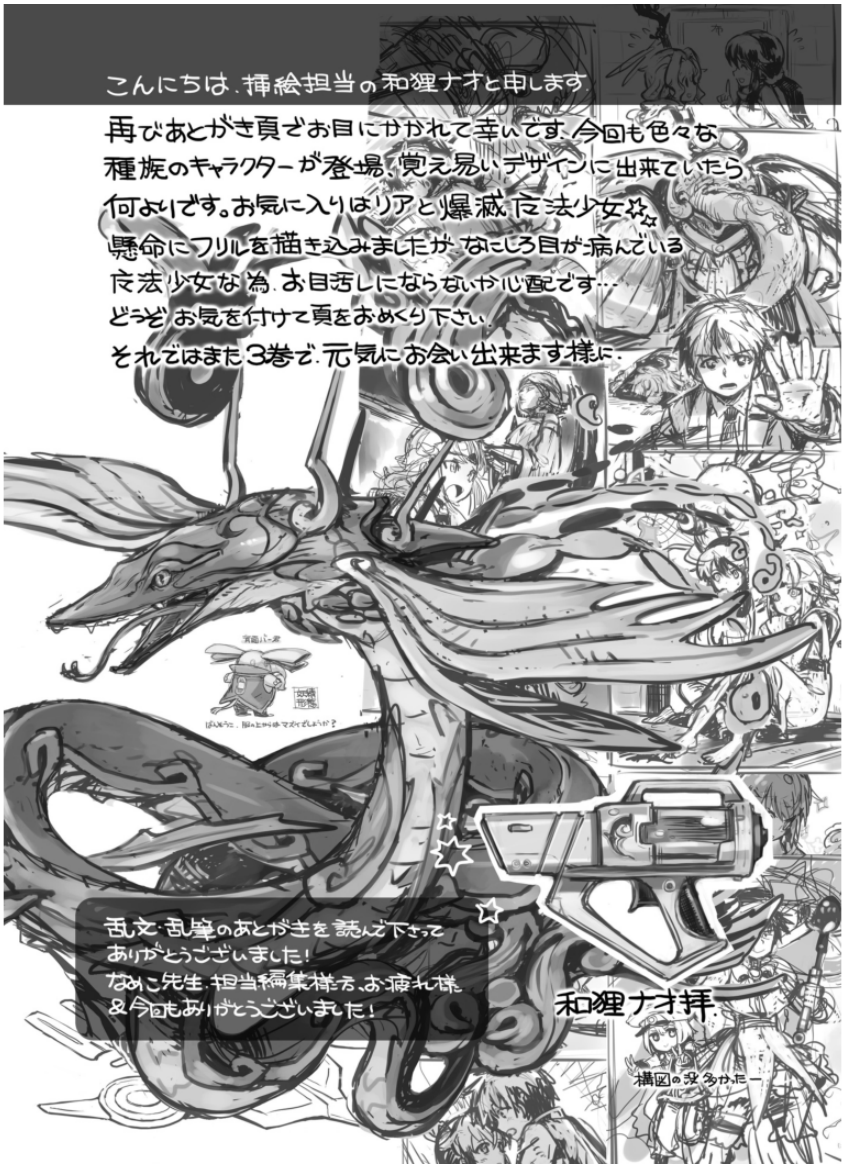
I went to a sports center with a friend a while ago. I played ping-pong, futsal, tennis, batting, fishing, and a bunch of other stuff, but part of the way through, my head really started to hurt. It was a bittersweet moment to realize I was getting old.

Anyway, this is a short afterword, so I'll get right to the acknowledgments. (It's not that I complained about the length last time and had them shorten it or anything. I mean it!)

Thank you to Nao Watanuki, as always, for the inspiring illustrations. The quality of the fifth illustration in particular is amazing. (You can count for yourself to see which one I'm talking about.)

And thanks to Nanbu, my editor, for the detailed plot checks.

And lastly, thanks for the reader for picking up this book. I hope you'll continue to enjoy the series.


こんにちは.挿絵担当の和狸ナオと申します
再びあとがき頁でお目にかかれて幸いです.今回も色々な
種族のキャラクターが登場.覚え易いデザインに出来ていたら
何よりです。お気に入りはリアと爆滅☆法少女☆
懸命にフリルを描き込みましたが.なにしろ目が痛んでいる
☆法少女な為.お目汚しにならないか心配です…
どうぞお気を付けて頁をおめくり下さい
それではまた3巻で.元気にお会い出来ます様に.
乱文.乱筆のあとがきを読んで下さって
ありがとうございました!
なめこ先生.担当編集様方.お疲れ様
&今回もありがとうございました!
和狸ナオ拝.

Illustrator's Note:

Hi, I'm Nao Watanuki, the illustrator.

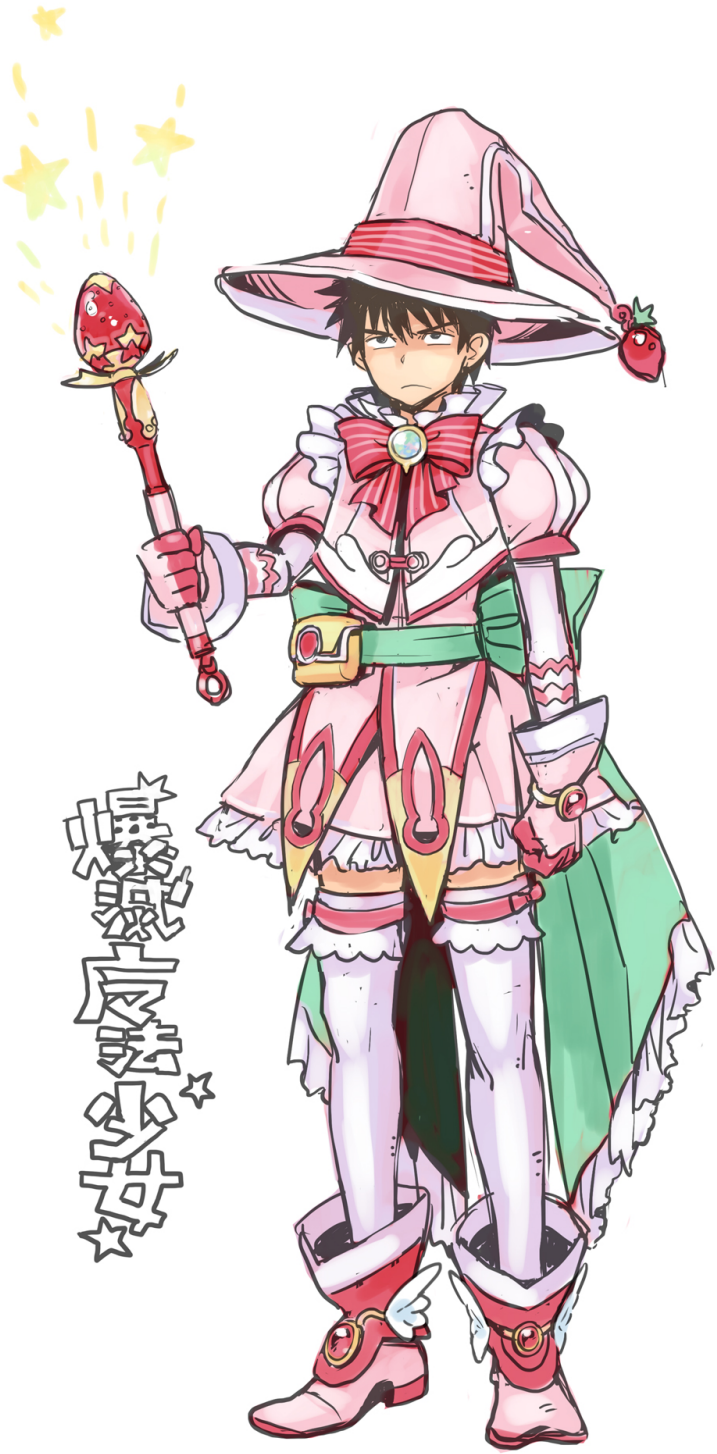
I'm happy I get to see you again in the afterword. Once again, there were a lot of characters of different races, so I hope I made their designs easy to remember. My personal favorites are Lea and the explosive magical girl. I spent a lot of time on the frills, but since this particular magical girl isn't your typical magical girl, I'm worried it might foul your eyes.

Please take care when reading this. Anyway, see you in volume 3!

Thanks for reading this terribly written afterword. It was a pleasure working with Nameko and the editors, and thanks again for letting me work with you!

Nao Watanuki

There were a lot of rejected designs...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I Saved Too Many Girls and Caused the Apocalypse: Volume 2
by Namekojirushi

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Edited by Megan Denton

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